What do creators and viewers owe each other? Microcelebrity, reciprocity, and transactional tingles in the ASMR YouTube community

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Abstract

ASMR has skyrocketed to international popularity in recent years, and a thriving community and cultural exists around the phenomenon on YouTube. However, misunderstandings about the practice persist, and little is known about this community in terms of its texts and practices. This research draws on a multiyear digital ethnography into the ASMR culture and community on YouTube, where I analyze how microcelebrity, the attention economy, platform-specific dynamics, and content creation merge. Drawing on extant research that identifies reciprocity as a key cultural dynamic on YouTube, I argue reciprocity in the ASMR YouTube community, as well as the relationship between creator and viewer, can best be understood as transactional tingles: relaxation in exchange for likes, clicks, and views within the attention economy. Transactional tingles is also a contemporary blending of more traditional art patronage and dealer-critic systems, which offers insights into the role viewers and platforms play in content creation, digital labor, and precarity.

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Introduction

A young, brunette woman sits in a modern bedroom. She wears noise-cancelling headphones and sits behind a microphone. She flutters her fingers and begins to speak in a voice only a hair above a whisper. “Tonight,” she says, “I’m going to be humming you to sleep” (Gibi ASMR, 2019c). The video, simply titled “ASMR | Humming You to Sleep,” has over one million views. Its creator, the whispering brunette, is Gibi ASMR, a YouTuber who has 2.48 million subscribers. ASMR, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, has become an international phenomenon in recent years, with creators hailing from around the globe. Additionally, the phenomenon gained cultural prominence when it was featured during a Michelob Ultra beer commercial during the 2019 American National Football League Superbowl, as well as in a feature-length film produced by Reese’s Canada that combined five ASMRtists, whispering, and candy. On
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YouTube, a large community and culture circulates around ASMR, with over 13 million videos tagged “ASMR.”

ASMR is a nascent term used to describe an age-old biological feeling: The tingling sensation on the scalp and down the spine. It has been compared to frission or pleasant paresthesia. ASMRtists (the colloquial term for someone who makes an ASMR video) and viewers refer to this feeling as tingles. Tingles are said to induce relaxation and comfort, and many who experience them report them as a temporary cure for anxiety or insomnia (Andersen, 2015; Gallagher, 2016). However, ASMR and its concomitant YouTube community remain fraught with stereotypes and misunderstandings. Most commonly, many assume ASMR to be sexual (Etchells, 2016), with others who are incapable of experiencing ASMR finding it unsettling (Sweeney, 2019).

This research is informed by the results of a multiyear participant observation and digital ethnography into the ASMR YouTube community to understand their texts and practices. Between February 2017 and February 2020, I watched over 180 hours of ASMR videos on YouTube and engaged with the community on Twitter and the ASMR Subreddit. I found YouTube’s ASMR culture and community is best understood through transactional tingles — relaxation for the viewer in exchange for metrics and potential but unguaranteed financial compensation. Lange (2019) identifies reciprocity as one of YouTube’s defining cultural dynamics, and transactional tingles is a specific type of reciprocal relationship. Transactional tingles is a sociocultural exchange, and it draws on traditional modes of artistic production. Reciprocity in transactional tingles is a hybrid model of the patronage and dealer-critic systems that have been part of the art world for centuries (Wolff, 1981). To be sure, ASMR and YouTube content creation are not a return to classical art. Rather, they have similarities to patronage and dealer-critic systems and must be contextualized within this contemporary juncture. To do so, I draw on scholarship on the attention economy, microcelebrity, and YouTube to theorize transactional tingles as a patronage/dealer-critic hybrid of content creation. ASMR and transactional tingles help expand scholarship on digital labor, content creation, and YouTube in three ways: first, it helps to understand ASMR’s ubiquity in networked cultures. Second, transactional tingles offer insights into how reciprocity is an undertheorized aspect of microcelebrity. Third, while I discuss transactional tingles as a hybrid model of patronage/dealer-critic system, future YouTube studies may draw on this framework to theorize other labor and content creation.

Literature review

ASMR

Before continuing, a brief overview of ASMR is necessary. As noted, ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. An individual can experience tingles from myriad stimuli, but this is unique to everyone. Gallagher (2016) elaborates how tingles “might be brought on by watching someone performing a meticulous task, by the cadence of voice, by whispering and soft sounds, or by expression of care, interest, and affirmation” [1]. ASMR’s whispering and soft-spoken nature creates a feeling of intimacy (Andersen, 2015). This, combined with descriptions of tingles as “brain orgasms” (Etchells, 2016), as well as the ASMR “roleplay,” subgenre means ASMR struggles to shed sexual stereotypes. Andersen (2015) notes however, broadly speaking, the ASMR community rejects any notion that it is fundamentally sexual. Sexual ASMR does exist, but not all ASMR is sexual.

Presently, ASMR manifests in numerous user-generated videos, with one ubiquitous type being the “roleplay” style. This consists of “solicitous figure who helps viewers achieve a sense of calm and wellbeing — spa attendants, shop assistants, and librarians” [2]. However, “not all ASMR videos are roleplays; demonstrations, show-and-tell displays and readings are also popular, as are videos in which ASMRtists manipulate objects (hairbrushes, putty, pebbles, feathers) to produce ‘tingly’ sounds” [3]. Regardless of style, most ASMR is characterized by intimacy. Andersen (2015) argues “although ASMR is
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not merely a physiological experience of pure affect, it is just as clearly linked to the emotional associations created through the experience of public intimacy” [4]. Intimacy, or perceived closeness, is key to ASMR. However, because intimacy on social media is often understood as having to follow social norms (Lambert, 2016), this may contribute to misunderstandings.

YouTube’s ASMR community did not start out as a purposeful hub to create and share planned ASMR videos. Gallagher (2016) notes individuals experiencing ASMR began finding each other on health forums in the early 2000s, and they began “circulating ‘unintentional’ videos (made for another purpose but effective as triggers)” [5]. Subsequently, creators made purposeful, planned ASMR videos. Around this time of burgeoning participatory social media cultures, YouTube seemed like the most logical setting for such intentional texts, as the site had recently shifted from being a digital video repository to promoting user-generated content (Burgess and Green, 2018). While early ASMRtists found YouTube’s affordances beneficial, as YouTube’s business model pivoted (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), the video-sharing site now misunderstands the phenomenon. Consequences of this include videos being incorrectly demonetized (simply put, disqualified from financial compensation in YouTube’s advertising revenue system), or failing to appear within the recommendation algorithm.

**Microcelebrity and the attention economy**

Even though ASMR’s primary goal is relaxation, given its position within networked cultures, it can be seen as social media entertainment: “An emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-your-self (DIY) to develop potentially sustainable business based on significant followings” [6]. Over the years, ASMR on YouTube shifted from what Burgess (2006) refers to as “vernacular creativity,” a form of amateur media production, to social media entertainment with professional content, millions of views, and sponsorships.

ASMRtists can be understood through microcelebrity and internet celebrity. Abidin (2018) distinguishes between these two, with the former referring to the curation of niche, online audiences on social media, and the latter a multi-platform approach for global, online and off-line audiences. While some ASMRtists may be Internet celebrities (as demonstrated by the Reese’s Canada film, as well as a 2019 VidCon convention panel called “The Stars of ASMR”), most ASMRtists practice microcelebrity. Marwick (2015) defines microcelebrity as “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audiences as fans” [7]. Microcelebrity is something a person does, not necessarily something they are. Microcelebrity frequently relies on direct interaction with fans, parasocial relations (in which an individual feels they have an interpersonal relationship with the celebrity), and authenticity (the feeling someone sees a “real” or “relatable” version of the creator) (Abidin, 2018). Marwick (2015) notes microcelebrity occurs through platform interfaces and affordances such as Instant Messenger, @replies, and comments. These techniques demonstrate how one may feel closer to a microcelebrity than they actually are, and microcelebrities curate a sense of intimacy with audiences through digital tools. In thinking through ASMRtists as microcelebrity, a double-layered intimacy is at work: How intimacy is needed to induce tingles, and how ASMRtists use microcelebrity strategies draw in, and keep, fans.

ASMR and microcelebrity are also situated within a broader “attention economy.” Within the attention economy, pageviews, clicks, likes, and metrics are synonymous with success. Marwick (2015) argues “the ‘attention economy’ is now a widespread marketing strategy which implies that in a media saturated world full of information, what is valuable is that which can attract ‘eyeballs’” [8]. An influx of content means individuals must make choices about what to consume. Within YouTube’s ASMR community, with over 13 million tagged videos, individuals have myriad choices about what to watch when relaxing. ASMRtists, like other vloggers and influencers, must strategically create content and curate relationships with viewers to garner continued attention. However, microcelebrity on YouTube must also be attuned to the platform’s structures and cultural dynamics, and it is such a focus I turn to below.
ASMR within YouTube’s affordances and cultural dynamics

A site’s cultural dynamics can have substantial influence on its practices. On YouTube, Lange (2019) discusses how a spirit of reciprocity dominates creator-viewer relationships, which is driven by the scarcity of time one has to grant to works. She writes, “within a limited ‘attention economy’ consisting of professional and amateur video creators, viewers must choose which works to watch. For socially sensitive video makers, when a viewer watches a video, an attentional debt is created” [9]. In ASMR, more than relaxation is exchanged — creators and viewers engage in a back-and-forth of producing and viewing content to meet needs and pay off attentional debts. A creator may feel the need to thank a viewer for choosing their video out of all the possible choices they had — an idiom indicated by the title of Lange’s (2019) study, Thanks for watching, and which also functions as a subtle nod and intimate gesture to the individual who chose their video and devoted their specific time to it. A viewer may also feel an attentional debt to keep their creator’s production going, so they can continue to view enjoyable content (Lange, 2019).

In addition to cultural dynamics, platforms play a role by shaping sociality (Gillespie, 2010). This is often done through a site’s affordances, or the features available within a given technology, and these have content creation implications. Reciprocity most often occurs through YouTube’s affordances, and Postigo (2016) identifies six key YouTube affordances: the video upload, the commenting system, the rating system, favoriting, the subscription system, and the advertising system. While Postigo (2016) touts these affordances as beneficial to all creators, my work reveals this is not necessarily the case. Specifically, the advertising revenue system is fraught with limitations and complications. Not every YouTuber is eligible for compensation from their videos, as they must first qualify for YouTube’s Partner Program. Even then, YouTube may choose to demonetize a creator’s video. While creators often get their videos demonetized for inappropriate language, sexual content, violence, misinformation, or radical politics (Lange, 2019), ASMRtists frequently find their work demonetized because of the “roleplay” subgenre (because of the word’s sexual connotations) and inappropriate public intimacy accusations (Lambert, 2016).

Though the site of YouTube itself is not a neutral player in creator-producer relations, and affordances are not divorced from the platforms they operate within. YouTube and its partner program play a pivotal role in content creation and consumption habits on the site. As Caplan and Gillespie (2020) identify, it is difficult to reconcile the idea of YouTube as an open platform for myriad expression in conjunction with what they define as the video-sharing site’s tiered governance strategy. This tiered government strategy “offer[s] different users different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized” [10]. The YouTube Partner Program and demonization indicate how YouTube intervenes — or interferes — in different ways for different communities and sets of users. This belies the notion that all creators and all content are treated equally and underscores the complications of YouTube not adequately understanding the content within its subcultures. For such an expensive subcommunity like ASMR, tiered governance exacerbates power differentials. YouTube takes advantage of creators when the site makes money off of the videos and viewers ASMRtists bring to the site, but yet they hinder the creator from profiting off of the video in the first place.

Lange (2019) further points out roadblocks to YouTube’s affordances by identifying insufficiencies. She discusses, “the YouTube service examines a variety of metrics in addition to subscriptions, such as watch time over a specific interval, user engagement (such as commenting) and view-to-subscriber ratios. If the ratios are off, high subscriber amounts will not guarantee monetization” [11]. Therefore, there are structural limits to cultural reciprocity on YouTube, as affordances do not equally line-up to pay off the attentional debt. Increased metrics in the attention economy may bolster one’s position on YouTube, but datafication does not necessarily guarantee financial compensation. If an ASMR video is demonetized, then viewers may have to rely on other affordances — or turn elsewhere — to support their favorite creators.

ASMR, YouTube, and patronage

One such external revenue mechanism is Patreon. Lewis (2018) writes, “Content creators can also relay the popularity of YouTube into monetary gains on other platforms. One of the most popular ways to do this is
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through the fundraising website Patreon, where fans make monthly donations for the content they support” [12]. Patreon is a form of crowdfunding, a novel, distributed approach for raising money (Davidson and Poor, 2015). Crowdfunding raises capital in a one-to-many format, where one asks for and provides a link for consumers to donate to future creative endeavors. Crowdfunding through sites like Patreon are indicative of neoliberal entertainer/fan relations (Booth, 2015), and it is also a way to circumvent a site’s potentially limiting affordances to find income elsewhere, while still posting content on the original site. Individuals may donate money via sites like Patreon, as financial compensation on YouTube is not guaranteed. Therefore, YouTube transactions generally occur through an interest being met in exchanged for clicks, likes, and views in the attention economy — which in turn bolster a creator’s online presence, and maybe then they will receive money from YouTube. This is the platform-creator-viewer means of exchange, and no money is directly traded between viewer and creator. Money only enters the relationship through YouTube. This system underscores the precarity of entrepreneurialism and digital content creation, in which one cannot be guaranteed money in exchange for work. Within social media entertainment, this makes crowdfunding sites like Patreon lucrative.

Perhaps this is why Burgess and Green (2018) theorize how YouTube functions as a patronage system — through being a financial arbiter monetizing some content and not others, YouTube indirectly shapes the site’s creativity. However, given the turn to sites like Patreon, viewers also engage in patronage directly with creators. One is more likely to donate to a Patreon if they feel positively towards a creator (Davidson and Poor, 2015), and therefore, creators, including ASMRtists, can engage in microcelebrity to cultivate those parasocial relationships and earn financial compensation.

However, Wolff (1981) notes crucial details of the art patronage system that give pause as to whether YouTube functions as patron. Wolff (1981) argues in traditional art patronage, the patron exercised ”an outrageous degree of interference into the artist’s work, to the extent of specifying what colours ... the painter should use and how the figures on the canvas should be depicted” [13]. YouTube does not exercise creative control to this degree and instead more broadly shapes the site’s creativity through allowing or not allowing certain subjects. In this way, YouTube functions as the dealer-critic. Wolff (1981) explains the shift from patronage to dealer-critic in the art world: “The patrons of art ... were displaced by the dealer-critic system in painting. In other words, people and institutions who were in effect mediators took on a more crucial place in the very immediate problem of economic survival for artists” [14]. YouTube functions as a dealer-critic because it is the institution that provides space for distribution and mediates content creation instead of detailing its production. This does not mean YouTube is an agnostic player, but rather, it is useful to think of the more indirect ways YouTube influences content creation through slightly more removed mediations, such as through advertising, the Partner Program, and decisions and policies. For instance, the more traditional types of dealer-critic mediators Wolff (1981) theorizes consisted of newspaper writeups of art shows or dealers choosing what to display in galleries or sell to wealthy buyers. YouTube as a slightly removed mediator, combined with Patreon’s role in crowdfunding support for ASMRtists, shows how both the patronage and dealer-critic model function simultaneously on YouTube. In this patronage/dealer-critic dialectic, both viewers and mediating institutions, such as platforms, play significant roles in the development of content and financial livelihood of creators.

Method

I conducted a three-year long participant observation into YouTube’s ASMR community. While I have never created an ASMR video, I have been an active participant, and I took copious fieldnotes upon the conclusion of each ASMR video viewing. Digital participant observation was appropriate here because when studying a community whose activity takes places exclusively online, conducting research off-line “would decontextualise the phenomenon and obscure meaning-making activity that was exclusively conducted on the Internet” [15]. It is important to note that in the below analysis, creators are not pseudonymized — I followed a similar approach to Lewis (2020) who argues when studying public-facing
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YouTube figures, context is necessary for understanding community. For this same reason, citations are included for YouTube videos, but not for specific comments, as the casual viewer is not public facing.

Between February 2017 and February 2020, I watched over 180 hours of ASMR YouTube videos. Most individual videos ranged from 15–30 minutes long, and I watched at least one video almost every day for three years. Creators ranged in all ages from teenagers to middle-aged men and women. They came from all demographics, with cisgender-presenting, younger, White women as the most common creator. In addition to viewing videos, I commented on them, liked them, and subscribed, engaging with the very affordances of reciprocity critiqued above. Upon conclusion of my viewing and associated video activity, I wrote memos on the videos, which included content summaries, top comments, and reflections on the interplay of both, as well as my own experiences. Analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2000) that allowed me to move from concrete realities to conceptual understandings of my data.

My video viewings were supplemented by public ASMRtist Twitter posts because “YouTube has struggled to successfully integrate social networking features into its video content platform; nonetheless, creators have been afforded the means to harness platforms like Twitter and Instagram to more efficiently engage with and aggregate their fan communities” [16]. Since I was interested in studying ASMR videos and its community, adding these tweets to my work was necessary to understand viewers and creators. For this same purpose, I also engaged with the ASMR Subreddit. Below, I present findings into transactional tingles, the patronage/dealer-critic hybrid system, and microcelebrity, intimacy, and reciprocity. For analysis, I split up evidence and insights into ASMR creators and ASMR viewers. This is done only to provide an in-depth snapshot of each, but the two must be understood in tandem. The discussion reunites these perspectives.

### Findings

**The ASMR creator**

ASMRtists want to make sure their viewers relax and get what they need out of watching their videos. Creators understand ASMR is often used to help relieve anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Video titles and content reflect this and offer up a means for alleviating ailments. For instance, Crystal ASMR titled one video, “Plucking Away Past Pains | Letting Go of Toxic Relationships | Personal Attention.” Insomnia relief titles are also popular, with fastASMR posting her video, “ASMR Fighting Your Insomnia in 20 Minutes,” and ASMR Power of Sound shared, “SLEEP 100% with this ASMR Hypnosis Video for Insomnia | Countdown for Sleep | Roleplay.” These videos titles demonstrate the numerous forms transactional tingles can take — creators seek metrics and financial capital in the attention economy, and viewers have their specific relaxation need met. Typically, when one watches an ASMR video, they are alone, potentially in a bedroom, and trying to fall asleep. Abidin (2018) notes how “the impact of microcelebrities ... [is] confined to the bedroom for identity-making or in the locale of an office for networking purposes” [17]. Within ASMR as microcelebrity practice, the bedroom plays a potential role for creator and viewer, compounding intimacy. This can make a viewer feel as if the creator is solely helping them, contributing to parasocial feelings.

Microcelebrity involves substantial work, time, and energy. ASMRtists do engage with their fans to bolster support for their material labor, and this can be done either through attention to platform metrics or directing one to an external site like Patreon. Regarding the former, ASMRtist MattyTingles began one video:

> Before I get into it, I just want to say thank you to everyone who continues to support me and show love and spreads positivity and yeah, I get a lot of comment saying, how can I
help you? How can I help support you? What’s the best way? And I just want to tell you guys that by far the best way to help and support me is to give it a thumbs up and comment below with your thoughts and concerns or what you loved, what you hated, whatever. That kind of engagement helps me more than you could ever know. (MattyTingles, 2019)

MattyTingles’s words reflect the dealer-critic system, in that he directs individuals to use the site’s affordances to help his career. His words also combine microcelebrity tactics of authenticity and parasocial relationship building within the dealer-critic system.

Within the patronage model, however, ASMRtists will often direct followers to Patreon. For instance, mads asmr uploaded “ASMR | REPEATING MY PATREON INFORMATION (SO RELAXING).” The video’s description reads:

Repeating my Patreon information has been very requested, so here it is! ... *DISCLAIMER* repeating this information is not to make anyone feel guilty on their financial situation by maybe not being able to afford my Patreon tier ... I love you all and will always have content for free here on YouTube! (mads asmr, 2019)

mads asmr’s words demonstrates two transactional tingles points — one, how creators encourage viewers to go to their Patreon accounts where a one-to-one means of exchange occurs. Two, video creation can be based on requests, which demonstrates how viewers, not just YouTube, can exert influence over future content. Donating to an ASMRtist’s Patreon also means the viewer may receive additional perks, as is the case with Melissa Rose ASMR, who includes in a video description: “Interested in personalized audio or a commissioned video? Check out my Patreon for a variety of rewards including custom audio files, early-access & ad-free video links, as well as personalized videos” (Melissa Rose ASMR, 2017). One benefit of transactional tingles and patronage is individualized content. Money can be exchanged for better-suited relaxation and anxiety relief.

I have already demonstrated how the relationship between YouTube and ASMRtists is fraught with misunderstandings, and this has material consequences for these creators in terms of earning income from their labor. In one tweet MattyTingles explains:

ASMR is the most misunderstood genre on YouTube, except we don’t have a genre on YouTube. We know the “algorithm” changes by the second and it has its flaws, yes. It’s been years. We make YouTube millions. We just want support from the platform. Meet with us. Let us explain.

MattyTingles’s tweet underscores the immense power differential between YouTube and creators, specifically ASMRtists. YouTube profits off of the viewers ASMR brings to the platform, yet in response, ASMR videos are demonetized or rendered less visible. Far from being solely the algorithm’s responsibility, MattyTingles’ words emphasize the slippages between the celebratory and exploitive dimensions of participatory culture.

YouTube’s ASMR culture is deeply imbricated within platform and larger social media dynamics, and it is not immune from the demands of the attention economy or social media entertainment. A transactional tingles complexity comes from what is sometimes a necessity of the attention economy — the pushing of ever more extreme content to retain old viewers and attract new ones. Lewis (2018) notes this is particularly problematic on YouTube, specifically as it relates to political content. But, producing ever more “extreme” ASMR exists as well. For instance, serial killer roleplays and kidnapping roleplays are common. One
popular ASMR channel, Ephemeral Rift, has a video with a spin on the popular “insomnia relief” style video, in which he is an “Insomnia Killer,” using plastic sheets and axes to “kill” the viewer’s insomnia (Ephemeral Rift, 2017). There also is an ASMR subgenre consisting of gynecologist and prostate exam roleplays. While some creators, such as Whispers Unicorn, use these videos as opportunities to normalize health practices, this is not always the case. A less frequently occurring subgenre of ASMR medical roleplays is the sperm collection roleplay. These videos are almost immediately removed, but evidence of their existence remains, usually on ASMR subreddits. Other ASMRtists bemoan this roleplay type, as it sets back any progress in pushing past sexual stereotypes. While readings of ASMR through the male gaze and sexual natures is outside the scope of this work, it is worth noting here to demonstrate how ASMR on YouTube is not created monolithically. Similarly, transactional tingles is always dependent on the creator and viewer in question and will be different for everyone. This underscores Lange’s (2019) argument that all reciprocity on YouTube is fundamentally heteromorphic, in that every individual viewer has a different need to be met or has different expectations. ASMR and transactional tingles functions similarly. Extreme content, like the “insomnia killer” video may be useful for one, but it might not work for someone else. Additionally, given how ASMR triggers are also unique for every individual, transactional tingles is necessarily heteromorphic.

The heteromorphic nature of transactional tingles means it is hard for creators to please everyone. This may be frustrating, especially given how much material work goes into producing videos. One tweet by Gibi ASMR reflects this:

> It’s super tough to please everyone in the ASMR community because every single person has very strong opinions on sounds, triggers, visuals, quality, etc. Make what you want and experiment when it strikes you or you want to try something new (@GibiOfficial, 2020).

This tweet is far from a dismissal of the ASMR viewer and instead shows that one, ASMR is an imaginative enterprise, and two, creators do put substantial time and energy into said creative work. While viewers may feel they have an attentional debt after watching a video since they chose that video over another, ASMRtists may feel a creational debt in that the actual material work, time, and energy they put into making a video is not thoroughly appreciated.

This creational debt is also compounded by the emotional labor of microcelebrity. A Slight Sounds ASMR tweet points this out:

> I’m so glad people feel so comfortable with creators to be raw and open with us. However, PLEASE understand that we are not professionals and talking to a therapist or psychiatrist is so important. There are even free and sliding-scale options for those who are tight on money. (@Slight_Sounds, 2019).

As discussed, ASMR has a double intimacy. The intimacy of ASMR and transactional tingles is compounded by the intimacy created by authenticity and relatability within microcelebrity. This creates a parasocial relationship, in which one may think they are closer to the creator than they actually are. While ASMR can relieve anxiety and stress, given the intimate nature of the problem to be alleviated and the content done to assuage it, an individual viewer may act on the parasocial relationship and seek out the creator for help — as seems to be the case with Slight Sounds ASMR. Creators walks a fine line of wanting to keep up the authenticity and relatability that helps build audiences, but it also means knowing when to recognize their own limitations.

Not all interactions creators have with viewers are positive, and transactional tingles does not have to be a benevolent exchange. The YouTube’s ASMR community is not immune from racism, sexism, harassment, and trolling. A lot of ASMRtists take this in stride, and sometimes even do what Gibi ASMR did and
release “Reading AWFUL Comments in ASMR” videos. These negative comment videos are one of the only ways to learn of and analyze such content, for as Gibi notes in her video, YouTube will automatically remove comments with extreme language, so they are not on the publicly available comments page. But, creators can still see them on the backend. Gibi discusses how she receives comments like “What the fuck? I fucking hate you, stop making videos! Everyone secretly hates you! You fucking disgusting whisperer”; and “You’re so ugly.” (Gibi ASMR, 2019b) Her comments also show that people who enjoy ASMR are not the only audience, as one comment says, “I can’t get through five seconds without laughing at how weird and gross this is.” Therefore, while the creator/viewer relationship of ASMR is dominated by transactional tingles, it is not the only type of exchange, and the relationship is not always beneficial.

The ASMR viewer

Whereas ASMRtists help viewers find ways to get by, viewers respond with what they have specifically received. For instance, on one video by ASMR Peony, a viewer wrote, “I really went through it at work today and I’ve been so exhausted. This is exactly what I needed for a good night’s rest.” On a Whispers Unicorn video, one commenter said, “Some of your older videos got me [sic] thru some rough nights of withdrawal like 4 years ago.” The use of personal anecdotes as comments shows the viewer’s side of reciprocity in transactional tingles, and individuals get more out of an ASMR video than average relaxation. This is one reason they may be willing to help out their favorite creators through likes, clicks, and money. Similarly, using ASMR to get by in hard times may enhance the viewer’s parasocial relationship with the creator.

Oftentimes, viewers are aware of their real or parasocial relationships with ASMRtists, and they seem to understand how this works within YouTube’s affordances. On a grocery store checkout roleplay by GibiASMR, one viewer left the comment, “Gibi and I have a simple relationship. She put me to sleep and she gets 100% watch time because of it” (Gibi ASMR, 2019a). This viewer acknowledged they fall asleep watching the video with the video continuing to play, meaning they have been relaxed. Gibi subsequently receives increased views and a good watch time ratio, which bolsters her position on YouTube — the mediated dealer-critic system at work.

Within patronage, however, mads asmr Patreon video is useful again. Video comments consist of, “Maddie: checks her phone. Patreon: YOU HAVE 100000000 NEW SUBS,” and “this is what I call amazing advertising.” Video comments show how viewers engage in the patronage part of transactional tingles to support their favorite creators. However, comments on this same video also reflect the requests aspect of ASMR and how it can be over-the-top. On mads asmr video, numerous comments say things like, “you should do a video repeating ‘loves’ [sic] i love when you say that”; “can you please do a magazine flip through and [sic] Talking about the products you like??”; and “can you repeat ‘three’ with an emphasis on the T?”. Within the patronage aspect of transactional tingles, demands can be highly particular — reflecting Wolff’s (1981) discussions of how traditional patronage could be intensely specific and even outrageous.

Disregarding wishes is navigating a fine line. Ignoring requests, even hyper-specific ones, can damage microcelebrity through obliterating parasocial relations. This is underscored by a comment on the same mads asmr video, where a commenter says, “I like that she listens to our requests and truly tries to do as much of them as she can. Like she really cares about her viewers enjoying her content and you can see that in how much she does videos we recommend.” In continuing to practice microcelebrity to retain fans, patronage itself becomes parasocial — viewers may have an inflated sense of just how much the creator is doing work for them. This is not to say creators do not care about their viewers, because research shows they do. But when the patronage of transactional tingles combines with microcelebrity, both creator and viewer may not have a truly accurate portrayal of where they stand with each other. Viewers may think they have stronger creative influence over future ASMR videos than they actually do. Creators may struggle to maintain appropriate boundaries with viewers while also continuing to build followings.

This transactional tingles imbalance comes to the fore when an ASMRtist stops making content, and they may disappear without a word. Given ASMR’s double intimacy, this can come across as not just upsetting...
news, but an egregious and personal affront to the fans and community. For instance, a popular creator, Heather Feather, stepped away from making ASMR videos for several years, and her so-called disappearance prompted many discussions on the ASMR subreddit:

On top of burnout, a lot of people have real life happen, and that's perfectly fine. I don’t begrudge anyone for having to stop or take time off. It’s the misplaced hype and whatnot that [sic] get on my nerves, seen a lot of failed promises and such over the years, and tons of people just up and vanishing. Not that the general viewer is owed anything at all (lingering patrons is another discussion, those people I emphasize with). (r/ASMR, “Heather Feather is finally coming back!”)

Despite declaring the general viewer is not owed anything, the comment suggests otherwise. It is noteworthy this commentor suggested they were over the “misplaced hype” — hype is bound up in exchanges, and “represents a crisis of value, erupting when a promotionally-driven state of anticipation cannot, for whatever reason, deliver on its promises” [18]. When an ASMRtist steps away from their craft, this creates a jarring disruption in the viewer/creator relationship. On YouTube, this means viewers may be left reeling after their “attentional debt” for investing, either through clicks, views, or money, is not repaid with more content they enjoy.

A similar conversation occurred on the ASMR subreddit regarding the “disappearance” of popular creator ASMRrequests. Someone posted asking where she had gone, and one person replied:

ASMR artists have a tendency to gather these large fan bases, earn the $ from said fan bases, and then disappear without a word to said fan bases ... thanks for the views and the $ fans, now F’off ... in reality though, if there are serious personal issues, then yeah, it’s understandable for them to just disappear and deal with that. But as a content creator myself, I’d feel like crap if I just ghosted my audience. (r/ASMR, “What happened to ASMRrequests?”)

For this viewer — who does not specify their content creation work — anything other than a serious personal issue is unacceptable in ceasing production. This view puts a heavy toll on the creator and may exacerbate their emotional and affective labor. Research shows how microcelebrities suffer from high degrees of burnout and feeling as if they constantly “owe” something to their followers (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2016). However, ASMRtist disappearances offer insight into what viewers may feel like they are owed within transactional tingles, even if it is detrimental to creators — when slighted, content appears to be more important than parasocial relationships. This also offers substantial insights into the power dynamics of transactional tingles and microcelebrity-fan relations. When one feels they are not getting what they want out of transactional tingles, either through being ignored in a request or a creator vanishing, the exchange is jarred. In this instance, creators possess power to stop the exchange, but disruption most likely means a loss of money and presence in the attention economy. Therefore, while viewers may have power in choosing to watch or donate, creators also retrain a different power in choosing whether or not to create at all.

Discussion and conclusion

While my findings separated the creators and viewers to analyze ASMR and transactional tingles, it is
prudent to bring them back together, since one cannot be understood without the other. The ASMR YouTube community, as well as the relationship between creator and viewer, can be understood through transactional tingles — relaxation in exchange for clicks, likes views, and other metrics in the attention economy. Nuances of transactional tingles are defined by a hybrid patronage/dealer-critic system, which draws on tenets of both artistic production methods. Within patronage, individuals who would also ultimately consume the work exercised hyper-specific control over future pieces. Within the dealer-critic model, individual patrons are replaced by the mediating role of institutions in creative production. Both of these systems function dialectically on YouTube, where the video-sharing site acts as mediator in terms of affordances, monetization, and policies and individuals back favorite creators through attention economy metrics. Individuals may also turn to a creator’s Patreon to financially back future projects when they are either one, invested in a specific creator; two, when YouTube has demonetized a creator’s videos; or three, a combination of both. McRobbie (2002) offers insight into why a hybrid model persists in the contemporary creative industries: “those working in the creative sector cannot simply rely on old working patterns associated with the art worlds, they have to find new ways of ‘working’ the new cultural economy” [19]. Given the specifics of YouTube and creator/viewer relations, creative control and financial compensation must occupy a space that accounts for the nuances of this contemporary juncture.

Art world finances must also change in these times. While Davidson and Poor (2015) argue patronage is too narrow and concentrated for digital cultures compared to the more distributed nature of crowdfunding, transactional tingles show how patronage can also be broadly distributed amongst the content delivery and networked technologies of social media entertainment. While patronage was typically a one-to-one relationship, transactional tingles as crowdfunding patronage is displayed en masse on a creator’s YouTube videos. ASMRtists will often thank Patreons in a list at the end of a video or give a shout-out at the beginning. They will also often encourage viewers to like, subscribe, or visit their external Patreon — essentially large-scale crowdfunding of the traditional patronage model.

The patronage/dealer-critic dialectic of content creation has implications for future social media entertainment and digital labor studies, particularly when considering what Patreon’s Web site says about itself:

Something unprecedented is happening on the Internet. The financial mechanism that funded the whole Web is being challenged. It’s more than just a platform and more than a new product: it’s a cultural sea change that is redefining what it means to be professional creator. It’s fans demanding to pay artists for the joy they’re given every day. It’s artists demanding to be paid for what they’re worth. It’s technology catching up to humanity ... last month, Patreon announced that we’re on track to spend over $150 million to creators in 2017 alone, from over a million financially active patrons ... imagine that. Fans paying creators ... (Conte, 2017).

It is actually very possible to imagine fans paying creators, especially considering how dominant reciprocity is on YouTube, and how YouTube has an imperfect system of affordances for so-called “fair” exchange. While Patreon may provide what creators and viewers both want, within the sociocultural history of content creation, it is not a novel concept. How it functions in conjunction with YouTube, however, does create a modern system where patrons and dealer-critics both play dominant roles in the creation, posting, sharing, and reception of content. Patreon’s discourse also ignores the fact a site like itself is only necessary in an era in which precarity is the dominant state of the moment. While Patreon is not limited to YouTubers, YouTube’s affordances, cultural dynamics, and site policies demonstrate how work on YouTube is always rife with financial instability.

In addition to historical amnesia, Patreon’s front-facing documents exude technological utopianism, which is not uncommon within Silicon Valley culture (Marwick, 2013). This is noteworthy, particularly given the
power imbalances of transactional tingles, microcelebrity, and YouTube reciprocity. First, the patronage/dealer-critic dialectic is rooted within considerations of microcelebrity, which ASMRtists use to bolster their online presences and build audiences. Compounded by the double intimacy of ASMR, this can make an audience member feel as if they have a strong say in the creation of future work, and this is enhanced when one has actually financially backed a creator. This can lead to tensions — or feeling as if ASMR did not “live up to the hype” — when content ceases to be made or is not made to the viewer’s liking. Larger media discourses continue to perpetuate the idea of YouTubers as fraudulent and untrustworthy (Deller and Murphy, 2020), and when one feels reciprocity has not been adequately acknowledged or compensated, this may aggravate such notions.

Second, reciprocity within microcelebrity can have stark consequences, particularly for women, people of color, and LGBTQ creators. Creators who occupy some of society’s most vulnerable positions can be harmed or marginalized further when a viewer feels their attentional debt has not been properly repaid. Christina Grimmie and Bianca Devins are two of the most extreme but and tragic instances of what can happen when cultural dynamics and exchange logics clash. Grimmie, a twenty-two-year-old YouTube singer was shot and killed by an obsessed male fan in 2016, and Devins, an “e-girl” Instagram celebrity was only 17 when she was murdered by an obsessed male friend and fan in 2019. While extreme, these cases draw attention to the complex role reciprocity plays in microcelebrity, and even into Internet celebrity. Less extreme, but still incredibly problematic instances were reflected by previous discussions of Gibi’s “Reading Awful Comments” video.

While reciprocity is one of YouTube’s dominant cultural dynamics, it is one that makes precarious work within the neoliberal culture industries even more unstable. Gill and Kanai (2018) argue we “are witnessing not simply the commercialization of feeling, but a new era of ‘emotional capitalism’” [20], in which women are the most like purveyors of such work. ASMR is particularly fraught under this, since affection, emotion, and physiology cannot be disentangled within the culture and phenomenon. ASMR, affect, and emotion all become commodified, which complicates and risks commodifying the practice’s relaxation and intimacy. Additionally, while I have noted how discussions of ASMR and the male gaze is outside the scope of this current work, it is important to note when considering emotional capitalism that most of the successful, highly visible ASMRtists are cisgender-appearing, young, white women. While this underscores the emotional labor performed by women in the digital culture industries (Duffy, 2016), it also prompts considerations of racism, ageism, and transphobia in seeking out relaxing content. Future studies can, and should, follow this avenue of inquiry.

Future studies may also explore how the patronage/dealer-critic dialectic occurs, or does not occur, within other YouTube communities and within other means of content creation. A limitation of this work comes from examining this within a singular community, but since that community remains relatively under researched despite its cultural prominence, this research offers other contributions to the literature as well. While ASMR on YouTube is largely characterized by a benevolent ethos of creators and viewers getting along and helping one another relax or succeed financially, this is not always the case, and reciprocity within social media microcelebrity can be a terse exchange.

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Notes
What do creators and viewers owe each other? Microcelebrity, reciprocity, and transactional tingles in the ASMR YouTube community

3. Ibid.
11. Lange, 2019, p. 126.
12. Lewis, 2018, p. 4.
14. Ibid.
17. Abidin, 2018, emphasis in original, p. 15.

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