

Listen, it's your virtual boyfriend: An Analysis of ASMR Boyfriends As Female-oriented Online Sex Work and Its Implications On Gender and Sexuality

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The following paragraphs are an edited version of the original research paper. I hereby state that this report is my own work and all sources used are made explicit in the text.

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Abstract

This research examines the emergent media genre – ASMR Boyfriends, a genre combining autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) and role-playing as boyfriends where emotional support is provided to largely an audience of females through giving personal attention, compliment and affirmations. It uses content analysis approach to investigate consumption practices of the South Korean ASMR boyfriend community, critically discusses the gender dynamics within the community and its potential as a new female-oriented online sex work. As a result, the mediated space of ASMR boyfriend is re-conceptualized and concluded into four themes: *capacity for alternate masculinity*, *expressions for female sexualities*, *male empowerment and manipulation*, and *new female-oriented sex work*. This dissertation also hopes to shed light on unpacking key issues in contemporary digital culture, such as human’s intimate relationship with networked devices and the formation of online collective identities; the emergence of new online cultural products; as well as highlighting the importance of research focusing on emerging media genre in the epistemic community.

Notes on the Usage of Korean Language

- I. This paper uses the official Korean-language romanization system adopted by South Korea.
- II. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Korean to English are on my own.

Introduction – “*Hello, thanks for coming by again today.*”

Sleep with me babe ...

[Boyfriend role-play ASMR has storylines that make you think about nothing and cool down from distancing thoughts.]

This is the description of boyfriend role-play ASMR written on one of the YouTube channels dedicated to boyfriend role-play ASMR videos, with themes such as “taking care of drunk girlfriend”, “sleep with boyfriend” and “playing a couple game”. Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (hereafter ASMR) is a pseudo-scientific term emerged from the online discussions of the sleep-inducing and relaxing effects of physical “tingling” triggers such as whispers, tapping and ambient sounds (alternatively known as white noises). ASMR earns popularity around the globe despite the debates on its functions and the auditory stimuli given out by its “thrills” or “soft sounds” – is it therapeutic, sleep-inducing, relaxing, sexual, or to provide care? As a result of the now prevalent ASMR videos uploaded mainly to YouTube, the ASMR community came into view due to active interactions of ASMR artists and their fans. Although relatively understudied, the ASMR online community holds the potential to explore the contemporary mechanism of how the general public gain pleasure, emotional attachment and digital intimacy.

Among the different genres of ASMR, role-playing ASMR claims to put audience to sleep by combining the characteristics of familiar day-to-day scenarios and providing the notions of care through sounds, on top of that, the popularity towards *ASMR boyfriends* implies something more than just aids for sleep deprivation. They talk to *you* in varieties of scenarios, roles, accents, personalities and instead of sleeping, the viewers might actually

experience a more excited and stimulated activity that takes part generally at night.

According to a research done by Smith and Snider, role-playing ASMR videos do not have to be convincing as they are merely a way of framing and a vehicle for aural triggers (2019), the recently observed pattern of active engagement among the ASMR boyfriend community nevertheless suggests a unprecedented level of online stickiness¹, affect and emotional attachment unlike the other ASMR online communities. Despite how the community makes its appearance in a relatively short period of time, the affect, participatory and transactional nature contribute to the discussion of a new participatory media genre; sexuality and gender dynamics entailed within also bestow on existing literature of gender and sexuality online.

This paper would like to explore how this relatively new online genre forms a new practice of sex work among the boundless networks on the internet; and how does sexuality and gender meddle in between these seemingly intimate yet distant “romantic relationships” between the ASMR boyfriends and audience. Following an overview of ASMR scholarship, I will present my research questions, and drawing on an extensive content analysis around the ASMR boyfriend community, the consumption pattern of the community is examined – focusing on the gender dynamics entailed within and the resemblance to online sex work.

Literature Review

ASMR and Digital Intimacy

Studies on ASMR also focuses on the reasons of receivers’ development of digital intimacy towards this kind of videos through the use of soft sounds. ASMR videos are often classified as mediated affective experiences because they are produced for personal use (Waldron, 2015), created a “suggestion of physical proximity and intimacy” and reproduced

¹ Viewers returning to the video repeatedly to re-experience the affective sites (Smith & Snider, 2019).

“gendered notions of care” through the aural triggers and stimuli that provide intimate, caring and nurturing feelings to the audience (Smith & Snider, 2019, p.45). Paula Clare Harper’s research suggested the ASMR videos have “traverse[d] the gap between the sonic and haptic” (2020, p.2) by magnifying sound effects one would encounter in scenarios that involve the haptic. In videos that include scenarios or role-plays, immediacy and intimacy is developed through discursively framing the listeners as the performers’ acquaintances as well as exploiting the sounds made on mundane objects and familiar bodily processes with other sensory parameters, for instance, describing the textures of objects (Harper, 2020). These familiar and soothing sounds generate public intimacy among the ASMR community, and as Rob Gallagher (2019) suggests, “foster new understandings of personhood” (p. 260). ASMR communities and the sharing experiences of ASMR videos complicate our definitions of self as the personal narrative is being negotiated in the process of bringing together the personhood to the online, public space (McNeill, 2012; see also Gallagher, 2019).

“The hair she is braiding is not my own ... nor would she recognize me if I met her walking down the street.”

(Waldron, 2015)

The binaural recording techniques in ASMR require the use of headphones which implies a highly intimate user experience for each individual among thousands of other viewers, and this kind of mediated intimacy is especially maximized in role-playing ASMR videos. According to Waldron (2015), mediated intimacy in role-playing scenarios is experienced through the boundary-crossing proximity of the performers’ voice and intruded into the viewer-listener’s field of vision. On the other hand, digital intimacy in role-playing ASMR is enhanced by the notions of care and pleasure in the scenarios. Like the above-stated quote, the scenarios are not necessarily realistic or appealed to the listeners’ personal

experiences, but the familiar forms of intimacy in our day-to-day lives and the deliberate engagement with various types of texture, of objects or of touching your own body, nonetheless acutely places phenomenological effect on the audience's body through providing personal and "caring attention" (Waldron, 2015).

ASMR and Affect Theory

Affect theory plays a big role in the discussion of ASMR's popularity among the academia, especially on how affect is formed collectively in online audience group with very different demographics. Smith and Snider (2019) pointed out that ASMR is intentionally affective, and identified ASMR as a "sticky affective site" (p. 41). The coexistence of affect and emotions has been highlighted while referring to renowned affect theorists. In 2015, Andersen points out the experiences of public intimacy in the videos featuring common triggers, like, whispered voice and tapping of fingers result in coexisting emotions and affect; although it "defies logic" and "felt as physiological charge" (p. 686). This echoes with Ben Anderson's earlier work in 2006 which defines recorded music used by individuals as the "intersection of affect, emotion and/or feeling; both internal and external" (see also Smith and Snider, 2019). The ambiguous position of ASMR among emotion and affect parallels how affect is being described and defined in multiple ways. The only certain association to affect theory is that ASMR is intentionally affective. From the identification of the ASMR experience that creates "stickiness" (Smith & Snider, 2019) in order to retain audience, to the intentional design of the viewing experiences to be explicitly comforting, familiar and sexually pleasurable from time to time.

In other words, ASMR prevails on the online community through digital intimacy generated from affect and emotions due to the common triggers and mundane objects given out through the sonic, and on the flip side, sounds and digital spaces in the ASMR

community “co-create affective intensities” (Smith & Snider, 2019, p. 47). It also reveals how the idea of affective experiences is defined and dominated by homogenic online culture that would easily appeal to a large group of online users. Referring to how Brennan (2004) defines affect as contagious, the affective experiences of ASMR on the one hand explain ASMR’s popularity and on the other hand open up discussions about the “contagiousness” of certain sexual or gender stereotypes induced by the intentionally affective ASMR boyfriends.

ASMR, Gender and Sexuality

Existing research on ASMR and its association to gender and sexuality mostly concerns female ASMR artists performing notions of care, or how they reinforce conventional femininity and sexuality. Harper (2020) points out that most successful performers in the ASMR industry usually fit into the hegemonic standards of desirable femininity - “overwhelmingly pale-skinned, thin, young, and conventionally attractive” (p. 3). Additionally, Waldon (2015) agreed on art historian Joceline Andersen’s take on how ASMR relies on heteronormative gender roles of care, for instance female masseuse and therapist from sleep clinic, and that ASMR artists’ popularity relates directly to her sexual appeal and Western standards of beauty. The above research studies show how academia associates the discussions around ASMR videos to the issue of gender as well as how it reinforces hegemonic sexualities of female roles. Although they focus only on female ASMR performers, it confirms how conventional gender stereotypes grapple within the ASMR community and suggest the reason for its popularity.

Constant debate over whether ASMR videos are sexual and pornographic exists both within the academia and on networked sites such as Reddit. While ASMR performers themselves do not want to be associated to such claims, scholars like Waldron (2016) and

public figures like Russell Brand (2015) look at the genre as a replica of female pornography and as JOI pornography (Jerk-Off Instructions) because of how the aural effects would make individuals feel *touched*, how the stimuli would bring corporeal pleasure and also how the roleplays involve sexual undertones. Harper (2020) used the example of ASMR videos featuring young girls talking to the microphone in their bedrooms, which often subjected to removal by the YouTube platform, to illustrate how they are still sites of contestation as the particular scenario is “meant to induce physical pleasure for members of an unknown, unknowable audience” (p.3) even though they do not constitute explicitly sexual content. Following this line of thinking, Russell Brand (2015) again in his critique upon the genre indicates how contemporary Western society dominates and defines sexually pleasurable triggers while on the flip side Waldron (2016) argues that the aural stimulation brought by the technologically mediated ASMR videos suggest a reconceptualization of alternative sexualities outside of the dominant Western paradigm of “two-bodied, heterosexual, genitally-focused, or orgasmic pleasure” (Conclusion).

It is, therefore, nevertheless debatable whether ASMR videos are sexual or pornographic as seen on the existing literature. However, the large number of roleplaying scenarios involving a performer with hegemonic standards of attractive features in an often privatised space who is making an effort in providing pleasures through the digital medium still largely reinforces gendered stereotypes and suggests further exigencies on the sexualities depicted by ASMR videos.

ASMR Role-plays

Although no specific research studies have been dedicated on ASMR boyfriends up to the point when this research is written, articles on role-playing nature ASMR videos emphasize the effect of genre-specific content in intensifying digital intimacy. Iossifidis’

article employs a case study of the ASMRtist (the neologized term of ASMR artists used in the article) Claire Tolan in illustrating how performing a feminized role with “reassuring female voice” builds “uncanny intimacy” that reminds the viewers of the idea that women are naturalized “caregivers” (2017, p. 113). Another research done on female ASMRtists explains the development of intimacy resulting from role-play scenarios with Judith Butler’s idea of gender performativity²; the scenarios simulate “personalized, intimate and sensual encounter” for the notion of gender is “citational” (Waldron, 2016). In other words, works have been done mostly on role-playing ASMR videos featuring female performers and suggest that digital intimacy is likely to be intensified since the female voices recall gender-related traits, like caring and mother-like, and stereotypes in the society.

ASMR Boyfriend

Discover ASMR, an information hub dedicated to ASMR, defines ASMR boyfriend as a genre where emotional support is provided to largely an audience of females through giving personal attention, compliment and affirmations (n.d.). According to an article discussing the relevance of ASMR boyfriends and sleep deprivation featured on the New York Times, it is suggested that these videos create a template for viewers on what is a normative relationship, while a clinical psychologist states that the claim of the videos being sleep-inducing is problematic because the subliminal message in these videos are not to help listeners in sleeping, but to foster “unrealistic and idealized perspective of what a partner can be” (Wlyde, 2019). Notably, a part of ASMR boyfriend videos includes highly sexualized content that would foster a normalized and idealized perspective among the listeners.

² Judith Butler’s infamous concept of performativity defines gender as an act, an act that is performative and the discourse is the “effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences” that subsequently divided and hierarchized genders under constraint, whereas, these differences have to be repeated in order to be recognized [citationality] (Butler, 1993).

Following Harper's classification of ASMR as a "body genre" (2020), features like role-playing and prevalence of the "kissing sound" triggers in ASMR boyfriend videos resemble pornography and have furthermore confirmed the notion in which Harper points out, is explicitly eroticising the sonic, and I add, the privatised public space.

Research Questions

The literature reviewed here links the popularity of ASMR videos to the prevalence of stereotypical sexual and gender dynamics. However, most scholars either concern female-led ASMR videos or focus on the neurological or psychiatric stimuli given by the sounds. This dissertation would like to alternatively examine the different scenarios in the boyfriend role-plays, its effect towards the audience and the performers themselves and the surrounding online communities. The study would also consider the ASMR boyfriend community in relation to the issue of sexuality, gender hierarchy and dynamics. In light of the aforementioned inquiries, this study seeks to put forward the discussion of the emergence of ASMR boyfriend videos and hence address the following questions:

Does the emergence of the new media product ASMR boyfriend videos bear the potential in becoming a novelty form of online sex work?

- What is the potential of the online space?

What are the gender dynamics at work in the ASMR boyfriend communities?

- Does it provide a space for alternative expressions of sexuality and gender roles?

Methodology

Case Selection – Why South Korean ASMR?

The South Korean ASMR boyfriend community is selected as the case for this writing. South Korea as the uprising media trendsetter for the globe creates viral media

products of different genres ranging from the infamous Gangnam Style which music video once exceeded YouTube's viewing limit, to the boy band BTS, and to the viral video contents such as "Mukbang" and "dalgona" coffee which have given rise to social media crazes worldwide. Therefore, the development and consumption of ASMR boyfriends in South Korea are significant in representing the genre as a whole. ASMR boyfriend is also distinctly popular in the South Korean ASMR community when compared to other parts of the world. According to an interview on the website ASMR University, a Korean ASMR YouTube channel consisting of more than 100,000 followers, Dana ASMR, points out that role-playing ASMR is the most popular ASMR category in Korea (Dr. Richard, 2015). In short, the recent fame of Korean media products and the prevalence of ASMR boyfriend role-play videos in South Korea contribute to the representativeness of this case selection for two reasons: on one hand it carries the potential of creating a global trend, and on the other hand the existing ASMR videos in South Korea are likely to be consumed by audience from different countries given the impact of the "Korean Wave"³.

Moreover, the extensive South Korean ASMR boyfriend community exhibits a unique consumption pattern and the fan culture is especially interesting. It is also intriguing to explore the notions of sexuality and gender dynamics entailed within such a community.

Sampling Method

The main dataset is drawn from user-created YouTube videos which contains the term "ASMR boyfriend" or "boyfriend role-play" in Korean (남자 ASMR; 남친롤플). Making use of the YouTube search algorithm, the top 50 videos will be first chosen. Although there is no clear explanation from YouTube regarding how the algorithm is calculated, a systematic

³ Korean wave, also broadly known as Hallyu, refers to the phenomenon of K-pop and Korean popular culture in general that have become globally popular in general (Kim, 2018).

observation conducted by Mosemghvdlshvili and Jansz in 2012 suggests that the algorithm is determined by relevance; which based on at least three criteria, namely tags in the titles, user ratings, and the number of views and comments. As relevance is by default the key factor in deciding what videos are to be displayed on YouTube search, I can assume users will most likely use this option and therefore the 50 videos are the most relevant and hence valuable for the research. However, to avoid solely relying on relevance, a dataset obtained through random systematic sampling will be combined in which videos uploaded within the time frame of 1 June to 1 August 2020 and videos in the suggested section of these videos will be randomly selected, composing the other 50 videos of the main dataset. It is noted that only active channels with a significant fan community and regular live-streamings will be selected for close analysis while the remaining will be served as secondary data⁴. The main dataset makes possible the access to further content communities, such as other live streaming websites and fan chat rooms⁵, as introduced by the YouTubers or mentioned in the comments which are combined to be part of the corpus.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework employed for this research is content analysis. The theoretically significant themes are guided by participants through content analysis of the South Korean ASMR community, while drawing in other feminist theories to facilitate the discussion. The methodology rationale behind is the assumption that we learn as we go (Haraway, 1997) - for production of new knowledge is expected from the emerging ASMR

⁴ An inductive qualitative model for content analysis suggests a careful analysis of subsets of data, followed by a categorization according to its importance or preconceived code categories to maximize the authenticity of the unit of analysis (Neuendorf, 2001; see also Leavy, 2011).

⁵ The information obtained from the description box of the video or the "About" section in the main page of YouTube channels. Further details and features are presented in the latter *Results* section.

community. This is hence the best way to analyse the dataset obtained from the content and develop theories based solely on the data provided⁶.

Content analysis of the South Korean ASMR community is an attempt to research in a flexible and wide-reaching manner and to reveal ideas about gendered subjectivities, masculinity and femininity contested within the new cultural artefacts. Content analysis is the “systematic study of texts and other cultural products or nonliving data forms” (Leavy, 2011, p. 226) that enables deeper investigations into the hidden cultural phenomena through identifying key tropes. Alongside conducting content analysis, the qualitative data analytic processes aims to identify unique gender dynamics and consumption patterns revealed in ASMR boyfriend videos, and explore how masculinities and femininities are reinvented in the networked community.

Using the model presented by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Kozinets (2013) and Leavy (2011), the coding procedures of audiovisual data and the ASMR community using content analysis take an inductive approach and enable knowledge building. The data is first organized into discrete groups (or units of analysis), coding the qualitative data into temporary labels to particular social phenomena. Robust labels through the analytical process are then sorted, abstracted, compared, refined, generalized and further analysed to identify significant categories, and then integrated into a theoretical analysis. Although this methodological choice may be deficient in generating a long-term and rich ethnography for the ASMR boyfriend community, it is effective in theorizing this comparatively new ASMR industry in a genre-specific manner.

Ethical Considerations

⁶ In the latter discussions, theories developed through the dataset are combined with previous feminist ethos in order to explore the gendered dynamics of the ASMR community.

The ever-developing arena of social media blurs lines separating public and private spheres (Patterson, 2018), which is why my dissertation on evaluating new digital media products may give rise to ethical tensions. As stated in YouTube's official privacy standards, while Google (YouTube's parent company) agrees to protect personal information, it does not limit individuals within or outside of the platform to use the data made available via YouTube. However, to minimise ethical risk, only materials that are available publicly, no matter on YouTube or other streaming platforms, will be selected. Taking the issue of privacy into consideration, all data employed will be de-identified. That being said, names of the YouTube channels and the IDs of the audience will not be mentioned in the study, including in the bibliography. This is to avoid unique markers that might identify participants in offline environments, as well as removing their online handles (Smith et al., 2016; see also Cheshire and Wickes, 2012). Therefore, it is especially noted here that all analysis presented below are not attributed to any one individual. Rather, the results are acquired from identifying key tropes from the aggregate dataset.

RESULTS – Content Analysis

After reviewing and evaluating the samples, the 100 video samples and relevant online communities are categorized into: active YouTube channels with extensive online community and regular live video streaming, YouTube channels with less active online community and YouTube channels without fan community that update regularly; and data obtained from the most active channels are prioritized according to this sampling categories. Common patterns and themes are identified through content analysis in which unique gender- or sexuality-related features are sorted out and explained below how they relate to a broader gendered discourse. These themes are divided into four elements: *the videos*, *the community*, *the "boyfriends"* and *the audience*.

The Videos – “*Let me teach you about sex.*”

The ASMR boyfriend videos obtained for the dataset are all different in terms of topics and formats. The length of the videos varies from as short as five minutes to long thirty-minute videos and sometimes divided into two parts. Contrary to how female performers in ASMR role-play videos usually show their faces in the videos, the majority of ASMR boyfriends do not reveal their faces while some would carry out a “face reveal” usually under the accomplishment of certain goals, for instance a particular number of subscription or view rates. Only two channels from the dataset feature ASMR boyfriends who are willing to reveal their face and subsequently their identities since the beginning of their channels. It is noted that the two channels consisted almost the least number of subscribers among the sampled YouTube channels at the time of sampling. Here it sets a contrast to female-led ASMR role-play videos for its absence of visual elements to assist viewers in making sense of the scenarios; and also how the popularity of ASMR boyfriend videos do not come from visual pleasure but solely from the affect and emotions gained from the sonic sphere.

The sampled videos have a large range of role-playing themes where the *roles* of the ASMR boyfriends are basically organized into categories such as: *strangers, acquaintances, friends, boyfriends and husbands, a tutor-like figure that teaches the listeners about sex.* Again, it contradicts the other ASMR role-plays that aim to provide notions of care and relaxation (Waldron, 2016) since the ASMR boyfriends are not always caring and nurturing, instead sometimes seducing, harsh, physically demanding. The combination of the dynamical roles of the performers and the stereotypical, or even cliché, romantic scenarios such as *waking up with boyfriend, playing a kinky couple game and comforting a sulky girlfriend* all on one hand fits into the dating dynamics of the society and on the other hand, departs from

the motives for ASMR to be sleep-inducing and soothing. One example from the content analysis covers a role-play scenario with a young male colleague flirting with the listeners in which the video demonstrates a personalized and sensual encounter that showcases speaking practices that are commonly known as flirting in the society. Phrases such as *baby, babe and I love you* are often observed, and viewers often respond with sexual- or erotic-related comments while referring to their own desire to have a normative romantic relationships. A paramount note to add is the prevalence of highly sexual content that tries to escape YouTube's censorship. These videos can easily avoid YouTube from deleting them because they often add deceiving and ambiguous titles for the videos and do not feature any visual content. Regardless of how South Korean ASMR boyfriends vary from their lengths, forms and content, the videos reinforce the societal definitions of romance and sexual relationships while presenting an alternative of role-playing ASMR at work.

The Community – “*Can you buy me nomnoms?*”

The ASMR boyfriend community, unlike the other genres on YouTube, makes use of the connectivity of YouTube and expands its community to the other online platforms. While most of the South Korean ASMR videos are still uploaded on YouTube, they make use of other subsidiary websites and mobile apps to upload either member-exclusive or adult-exclusive content⁷. Member-exclusive contents are regularly updated to websites like *patreon.com, fanding.kr and cafe.naver.com* where paid membership and user age verification are required. Apart from that, active and frequent communication are prominent among popular ASMR channels. Regular live streamings usually start from 21:00 or 22:00 until late night in which the audience can ask questions or casually express their opinions,

⁷ South Korean ASMR boyfriends tend to use websites such as *patreon.com, soundgasm* and mobile applications like *da/voice* which are all highly exclusive to upload their highly sexual content in order to avoid the infringement of YouTube restrictions and possibly to stay out of the public eye.

“donate” in order to support the ASMR boyfriends. It is noted that the live streamings held on YouTube are often deleted right after the session or sometimes being blocked by YouTube in the middle. Moreover, other communication platforms such as online chat rooms on the Korean equivalent of WhatsApp, *Kakao Talk*, *Instagram* and websites such as *Discord* all uphold certain level of confidentiality ranging from private accounts, passwords to paid memberships.

The ASMR boyfriend community is highly systematic with strict and hierarchical rules among the fan community. Although the subscribers are the known consumers of the media product, the performers have the right to set out rules that protect their identities and reconfirm the hierarchy within the community. Commonly observed rules are:

- [1] Informal speech towards the ASMR boyfriends is prohibited
- [2] Questions about the ASMR boyfriends’ real identity are banned
- [3] Private conversations between viewers are not allowed
- [4] *Fan manager* reserves the right to block viewers during live streamings

In the Korean language system, formal speech is characterized as a normative form of politeness (Byon, 2006; see also Sohn, 1999), usually towards people older than the speaker, superiors or someone at work. While a lot of live streaming sessions involve the ASMR boyfriends speaking informal speech towards the audience and the audience are forced to use formal speech, it reinforces a hierarchy where the ASMR boyfriends hold a dominant position over the viewers. Moreover, fan managers are loyal subscribers whom the ASMR boyfriends appoint them the rights to control the logistics⁸ in the chat rooms or live streamings. Here, a clear authority and hierarchical structure is once again strengthened

⁸ Fan managers have different responsibilities but depends on what rights the ASMR boyfriends give them. Usually, they monitor if anyone breaks the rules, thank people who donated, help the YouTubers make official announcements, answer questions raised by newcomers and ban people from talking.

where male holds a dominant position, followed by mostly female fan managers appointed by the male performers, and lastly the female viewers. In short, the South Korean ASMR community is extremely exclusive and highly restricted with low accessibility as they carry out part of their activities in eminently niche digital platforms; and depicts systematic hierarchy that are not like any other online community.

The “Boyfriends” – *“I’m interested in you, can I get your number?”*

Following the discussion on the ASMR community, the ASMR boyfriends themselves are another point of interest towards the exploration of gender dynamics within the genre. In the aforementioned communication platforms, the ASMR boyfriends would share their private lives and upload pictures of their body parts, such as their hands or shoulders at intervals. While the identities of the performers are still being protected, partial information is still revealed to dedicated audiences who, sometimes paying to, subscribe to their subsidiary fan communities. This, in my opinion, reveals the intervention of money among this media genre and allows the ASMR boyfriends to perform an alternative gender role. For example, the ASMR boyfriends perform different identities, or they termed “alter egos” (인격; in-gyeok), in their live streamings when they get paid; or in their role-play videos to accommodate the needs of their viewers. On request, the ASMR boyfriends perform roles like homosexual men, manly characters, men speaking in dialects⁹, and even as children. Moreover, when viewers “donate” money in the live streamings, the boyfriends usually thank them by making kissing sounds as a kind of “fan service”. It is observed that, in one of the popular and hence systematic channels, viewers donate 4.5 GBP during live streaming sessions to play a specially-designed roulette with results such as deep kissing

⁹ In South Korean culture, speaking in dialects gives off the impression that one is “sexy”, tough and masculine because it involves more expletives and the intonation is more distinct.

sounds and 10 minutes “phone dating”. These special functions of the ASMR boyfriend community are made use by the ASMR boyfriends for income-making, but also allows them the freedom to perform different identities in a space away from public sight. The ASMR boyfriends monetize affect and emotions and even their own privacies as a currency of exchange, whereas the viewers monetize their *support* into donations and as a result they get satisfactions and pleasures.

The Audience – “*Thank you for the gifts and donations, Jagiya¹⁰*”

According to the live video streaming sessions, the major demographic group of the audience are females in their 20-30s. The dynamics between the ASMR boyfriends and the audiences are intriguing considering the fact that the audiences provide the major source of income for the performers; therefore one would think that the *boyfriends* would adopt a submissive attitude while interacting with their fans. However, the result shows otherwise.

Behaviours of the audience are on the whole contradicting in terms of how they unconventionally open up about sexuality and desires but at the same time, nonetheless subjected to the *boyfriends*’ control; and that their consumption pattern resembles that of typical online sex work. Firstly, the content analysis of the comment sections under the YouTube videos, fan community and live streamings shows that the viewers are provided a “liberated” space where they can talk about their own sexual desires, relationship issues and normative dating ideals. The basic themes observed in the comment sections are categorized into wellness and health, real-life account and template for normative relationships. While a number of the comments link ASMR boyfriend videos to the issue of wellness and health, some viewers state the videos are sleep-inducing and polarizing views point out that they are

¹⁰ *Jagiya* (자기야) means *my dear* in Korean which is frequently used to call one’s partner in romantic relationships.

getting insomnia because of the ASMR boyfriends' *sexy* voice. Moreover, the audience tends to link the role-play scenarios to their personal lives, recount their own experiences, reveal the desire for sexual activity and this reveals how they rely on the ASMR boyfriends to seek fantasy and imagination on relationships. The comment analysis also discloses the viewers' expectation of normative romantic relationships where men should be dominant, or men speaking in a loving manner.

Moreover, the consumption pattern of this particular media product largely resembles that of online sex work but with a more emotionally attached audience group. As much as the normative romantic relationships are presented in the videos, the audience sometimes send self-written scripts and pay the *boyfriends* to be featured on their channels. The existence of monetary exchange and the idea of how the audience pay the performers while expecting something in return, such as featuring their scripts or giving them credits in live streamings, take after the features of online sex work because the audience get sexual and emotional satisfaction from the videos. Unlike traditional sex work, the listener-viewers are more affectively linked to the ASMR boyfriends, for example, referring them as their real boyfriends in the comments and developing intimacy with the performers, such as stating them as "the only perfect man". The high intimacy towards the *boyfriends* layered with the monetary exchange contribution to the discussion of the genre as a new form of online sex work. Regardless of the possibility that the audience might simply want a boyfriend figure to facilitate their imagination towards love and sex or to solely support the media products, it still largely resembles sex work where money is paid in exchange for a kind of self-satisfying pseudo-dating and to seek attention.

On a different note, some audience would regularly send gifts and “fan arts”¹¹ and this can be defined as part of the feminist fan economy as Flegel and Roth termed female-led creative production (2014). However, as Kosnik argues, this unpaid labour is in fact discursively connecting the audience with feminine gender-role stereotypes about often-invisible and uncomplaining “labours of love” (2009, p. 118). The dichotomy between the viewers’ unpaid labour and the ASMR boyfriends’ additional source of income, when compared to regular YouTubers, continuously stigmatizes the gendered feminine role as the unconditionally caring figure and reiterates a gender hierarchy.

Conclusion – “*Goodnight I’ll see you in my dreams, saranghae!*”¹²”

The online space provides anonymity and the boundless characteristic of it enables the originally obscure activities to take place. Although risks being scrutinized, a “sex space” is formed and disassociated the idea of sex as a private activity. The South Korean ASMR boyfriend community has become an example of sex subcultures established through the broadened online space in which women act as the main consumers. It is suggested that the genre creates a feeling that the *boyfriends* are only talking to you and hence creating a privatised public space to open up about sexuality, developing digital intimacy and the audience are more likely to pay in exchange for personal satisfaction, whereas, in fact the video streaming sessions are not one-to-one but open to all. Nevertheless, the online space does bear the potential for this genre to become a novelty form of online sex work as the monetary exchanges are primarily for emotional or sexual satisfaction instead of entertainment purpose or solely as a form of support to the performers. It also breaks the stereotypes of linking sex to the haptic or visual spheres.

¹¹ A form of cultural texts in digital pop culture where fans would take part in creative works, and in this case, drawings and artworks (Sugihartati, 2017).

¹² *Saranghae* (사랑해) means *I love you* in Korean.

This particular online community allows ASMR boyfriends to perform diverse forms of masculinity, for instance innocent, dependent, tough and homosexual. The male performers can ostensibly avoid public sight and judgements on this space and at the same time, making profits up to 30000GBP per month. On the other hand, female viewers can perform alternative gender roles as the outspoken and the payer, speak up about sexuality and reiterate their own experiences. It is as if, in this community the gender roles and sexuality can be conveyed differently, and that sex work is consumed mainly by women. Moreover, it is important to take note of the gender dynamics at work that apropos of how women seem to be “liberated” and men subjected to their dominance with women as the main consumer, the male performers get to set out rules and manage the community.

The insights gained from the findings is effective in exploring how gender dynamics and a new pattern of online sex work is formed among the ASMR boyfriend community. However, the study was limited with respect to sampling as YouTube has frequently modified how searched videos are retrieved and the search protocols employed on YouTube lack transparency (Van Dijck, 2009). In particular, the search results of YouTube are personalized based on the users’ watch history despite the researcher’s effort in conducting both relevance sampling and random sampling methods. Another possible limitation, though, relates to the trajectory of the researcher who is socially situated in a multilingual and multicultural epistemic community and therefore might have difficulty in understanding different aspects of social location and identity impinged on the research relationship (Phoenix, 1994); and might have taken for granted assumptions and bias over how the research targets act, hence influencing the analysis. Even so, the results collected is meaningful to academia as an attempt to collect data for this emerging, yet-to-be-explored media genre. Despite foreseeable difficulties, future research can work on in-depth qualitative

interviews with both the ASMR boyfriends and the viewers to better understand their motives behind engaging in such media genre.

In spite of the fact that ASMR boyfriend bears the potential of being a novelty form of female-oriented online sex platform, we must not discount it as a female-only genre and be mindful as a feminist researcher that the results obtained do not represent every single stakeholders. This dissertation, all in all, makes three contributions: it presents an alternative instance of female-oriented online sex work that focuses on the sonic instead of the attainment of virtual bodies; sheds light on individuals' relationship with the digital culture; and lastly, introduces and unpacks the sexuality and gender dynamics of the ASMR boyfriend community.

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