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The effect of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) messages on consumer brand perceptions and intentions

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Abstract

For the past 10 years, a new genre of media content called ASMR has been growing rapidly in popularity. ASMR is described as a pleasurable tingling sensation usually triggered by different audio-visual signals, performed by so-called ASMRtists. These triggers have been shown to lead to increased parasocial identification with ASMRtists as well as a stronger commitment to their marketing messages. Yet so far, the effectiveness of ASMR marketing has not been directly compared to the effectiveness of typical influencer marketing. Using two consecutive 2×2 experiments among 408 consumers, this study compares the effect of a sponsorship message of two ASMRtists with two YouTube influencers. The results show that ASMR can be induced even by short, sponsored messages and that it positively influences the perception of both the advertised brand and the ASMRtist presenting it. Hence, ASMRtists are suitable brand ambassadors for marketers looking to reach an underserved online community.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Twelve years ago, a seemingly innocuous video titled “Cranial Nerve Test with Pat LaFontaine & Dr. James Kelly” went viral, climbing to 38 M views as of today. The video was posted by the “BrainLine” association, providing information for people affected by brain injuries. The video itself shows a doctor performing several simple tests on his patient—its purpose clearly to educate rather than to entertain. A few months later, YouTube and many other platforms would see thousands of re-enactments of these cranial nerve tests, mostly performed by people with no association to the medical field (Page, 2013). These re-enactments, together with videos of head massages, meditations, and people eating close to a microphone or whispering positive affirmations, became the bedrock of what is known today as the “ASMR-Community” (Lopez, 2018; Page, 2013).

The pseudo-scientific term ASMR, standing for “autonomous sensory meridian response”, was supposedly coined by Jennifer Allen (Richard, 2016) to describe the experience of “a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck and at times further areas” of the body (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 1). It is triggered by a wide variety of

audio and visual stimuli and “widely reported to be accompanied by feelings of relaxation and well-being” (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p. 1). Since then, a fast-growing community of so-called “ASMRtists” (spoken as ASM-artist) on YouTube and other video-sharing and streaming platforms has sprung up, with views for popular creators regularly numbering in the millions (LaMotte, 2022; Lopez, 2018). In the US alone, the number of ASMRtists on Instagram grew from an estimated 701 in 2018 to 7129 full-time ASMRtists in 2022 (Agarwal & Kavali, 2023). In 2023, over 110 million hours of ASMR content were streamed and watched by an average of 12'664 daily live viewers (SullyGnome.com, 2023). Finally, an estimation of the fan website “ASMR University” reported the number of ASMR channels on YouTube in 2022 to be over 500'000 with about 2.5 million ASMR videos being featured on the platform—not counting shorts or unlabeled ASMR content (Richard, 2022).

Despite the size of the phenomena, comparatively little research has been specifically devoted to the topic of ASMR content (Engelbregt et al., 2022, p. 1727). This might be due to its supposed overlap with similar phenomena such as flow (Barratt & Davis, 2015), frisson (Kovacevich & Huron, 2019), or synesthesia (Del Campo & Kehle, 2016) or due to its comparative newness. Like these

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constructs, ASMR has been linked with relaxation, meditation, calmness, improved mood, improved attentional performance, lowered heart rate, and a higher openness-to-experience (Engelbrecht et al., 2022; Fredborg et al., 2017). First studies have also operationalized the construct and reliably measured it with a self-report scale (Roberts et al., 2019).

Considering the number of loyal viewers drawn by ASMRtists, the phenomenon has also drawn the attention of the marketing field. After all, ASMRtists are in many ways the ideal influencers—producing content that is supposed to be consumed repeatedly and regularly while only seldomly considered to be not family-friendly. It can also be assumed that, like with podcast advertisements, listeners' habitual exposure to the messaging and the narrative support supplied by ASMRtists leads to a more favorable perception of sponsored content in viewers (Moe, 2021). Since the market of influencer marketing has been steeply growing over the last decade and reached 20 billion USD market size, ASMR influencers can build on an emerging market segment (Enberg, 2022). However, despite its economic significance, numerous inquiries about the impact influencers exert on their followers remain unanswered (Hudders et al., 2020).

This is especially true of the effect ASMRtists as influencer could have on their audience. Many ASMRtists strive to simulate close and personal relationships with their viewers, often including them directly as a point-of-view character. This is likely to foster parasocial relationships, which lead to higher trust and identification with the influencer (Lee & Watkins, 2016) and to a positive effect on purchase intention (Harrigan et al., 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). As Chae, et al. (2021, p. 471) put it: “Ironically, since other ads are so loud and fancy, ASMR's quiet nature becomes even more unique and special, making it easier to catch the eyes of the public.”

The effectiveness of ASMR advertising and messaging has been demonstrated in past studies (Bogueva & Marinova, 2020; Chae et al., 2021), but never in comparison with regular influencer marketing. Since a large part of the effectiveness of influencer marketing is based on parasocial interactions, the same is likely to be true for ASMRtists. Hence, this study aims to isolate the effect of ASMR in sponsored messaging to answer the following questions:

RQ1. Does using ASMR triggers in sponsored messaging influence consumers' ad and brand perception as well as their buying intention?

RQ2. Are ASMR triggers in sponsored messaging more effective in influencing consumers' ad and brand perception as well as their buying intention than regular sponsored messaging by influencers?

A quantitative 2×2 experimental study design was chosen to provide first insights into the link between ASMR advertising and consumers' reactions. Across two survey-experiments, 408 participants were confronted with either a female or male YouTube influencer delivering a sponsorship message for the same earbuds—either using ASMR triggers or not. The results show, that a higher perceived ASMR positively influences the perception of sponsored messages and the

person delivering them through a heightened desire for parasocial interaction. This in turn leads to a positive effect on purchase intention.

2 | THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 | What is ASMR?

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (abbreviated to ASMR) is, despite its medical-sounding name, closer to an internet slang term rather than a scientific one (Chae et al., 2021). As such, the research field is still young, with the first peer-reviewed study only being published in 2015 (Barratt & Davis, 2015). Additionally, the condition itself is “controversial” because apart from experience reports from users and a variety of consistent triggers, it is hard to isolate the effect itself (Smith et al., 2017, p. 361). Past studies have tried to conceptualize ASMR as a form of “mild frisson”—a musically induced physiological reaction also characterized by calmness, goosebumps, and skin responses (Kovacevich & Huron, 2019, p. 59). However, due to difference in triggers (musical bombast vs. quiet intimate sounds) and the reliability of these triggers, it is still mostly considered a distinct effect from frisson (Poerio et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017). The same is true for ASMR's similarity with flow; even though there are a lot of ASMRtists who employ simple “follow my directions” games in their videos as triggers, most ASMR is caused without any input from the viewer's part—thus making it unlikely that it is the same effect as the activity-based flow-state (Barratt & Davis, 2015; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Due to the prevalence of triggers associated with simulated intimacy (kissing, loving affirmations, hair-stroking, etc.) the link to emotional support (Andersen, 2015) or even sexual pleasure is also often drawn (Waldron, 2017). While ASMR pornography exists, most public speaking ASMRtists and viewers have repeatedly stated, that the effect is distinct from sexual arousal or desire (Hay, 2022). Finally, research shows that ASMR is often used by young people to seek relaxation and that it could have positive effects on mental health (Sakurai et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the wide variety of ASMR triggers, there seems to be little confusion in what people who experience ASMR consider to be “ASMR content”. Based on the principle “I know it when I see it” (Gewirtz, 1996), triggers for ASMR are constantly being identified—even in other media—such as with the example of Dr. James Kelly. These so called “unintentional ASMR” videos bear a striking aesthetic resemblance with content specifically created to contain ASMR triggers (Lenti, 2020). A recent study by Poerio et al. (2023) showed that this is no accident, as most ASMR triggers are stable over time and can be successfully categorized in terms of effectiveness. Hence, most scientific studies—even those with the specific goal to conceptualize ASMR—treat the condition as a distinct phenomenon which can be observed on its own (see e.g., Roberts et al., 2019).

The few existing peer-reviewed studies into ASMR, its antecedents and consequences freely admit that “the mechanisms of ASMR are currently unknown” (Eid et al., 2022). This despite a range of measurable and reliable physical (lowered heart rate, skin conductivity,

changes visible in an electroencephalogram) and mental (mood improvement, anxiety reduction) changes supposedly brought on by ASMR (Engelbregt et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2017).

Taking the condition as a given, it becomes evident from both comment sections of ASMR videos and from reported empirical findings that ASMR promotes well-being, relaxation, and sleep (Eid et al., 2022; McErlean & Banissy, 2017; Paszkiel et al., 2020; Poerio et al., 2018). Other findings associate ASMR with a short-term reduction of anxiety, especially in people with high values in the neuroticism personality trait score (Eid et al., 2022). In total, the condition is often described as “intensely pleasurable” and jokingly referred to as “Eargasm” or “Brain Orgasm” (Chae et al., 2021; Lopez, 2018; Richard, 2016). This softening of fear and anxiety and its release will lead to more positive reactions from the audience (Dolinski & Nawrat, 1998), which in turn drives the parasocial identification (PSI) with the ASMRtist (Lee & Watkins, 2016). This connection between ASMR's anxiety relieve and identification was first shown by Suci et al. (2023) whose results indicate that incorporating a negative appeal alongside ASMR, as opposed to non-ASMR exposures, can notably reduce anxiety among young adults.

Hence, it is no wonder that many ASMRtists built a successful career by presenting and researching new triggers for the phenomena. Many of the most successful ASMRtists on YouTube have been producing regular videos for more than 8 years. Despite the daily increasing number of videos, there seems to be no decline in demand for their specific brand of ASMR content—similar to influencers in other niches (Johnson et al., 2021).

2.2 | ASMR and influencer marketing

The ASMR trend has shown no sign of slowing down in over ten years (see Figure 1) and many ASMRtists have become influencers with large platforms of loyal viewers. Creators like Gibi ASMR or Darling ASMR regularly draw views in the millions per video—with additional viewers being won on other platforms such as Twitch or Instagram (Peabody, 2022). It is therefore no surprise that marketers (see e.g., Taylor, 2022) and marketing science alike have

started to pay attention to the phenomenon (Baek et al., 2018; Bogueva & Marinova, 2020; Chae et al., 2021; Gasser, 2022; Sands et al., 2022).

First results are promising and speak towards ASMR being a promoter for a specific kind of niche influencer marketing. A study by Chae et al. (2021, p. 470) showed that ASMR content was effective in building an “emotional bond” for a brand through inducing personal and communal nostalgia. As such, it is purported to be an effective marketing tool for products relying on multisensory experiences—such as clothes (warmth, textile feel, sounds while moving), food (texture, sound, movement) or consumer electronics (sound quality, feel of buttons, screen quality, etc.). Building upon these results, Sands et al. (2022) demonstrated that ASMR audio, compared to normal audio in an advertisement, has a positive impact on advertisement recall. This heightened focus on messages and recall was also observed in a qualitative study by Bogueva and Marinova (2020), where ASMR audio was used to deliver climate change messages to viewers. However, their results showed that ASMR was more effective in anchoring positive and hopeful messages rather than warnings. Together, these finding hint towards the feasibility of trying to induce positive feelings in consumers through ASMR marketing—albeit in specific contexts (Pilny et al., 2022). ASMR is often already used for promotions of edible fast moving consumer goods (Chae et al., 2021), but further research must be done to understand the effectiveness of ASMR promotions outside the food-industry (Lee & Wan, 2023).

While this appears promising, advertisements or branded content utilizing ASMR triggers are still few and far between. This is most likely because ASMR advertisements only seem to work when specific conditions are met (Bogueva & Marinova, 2020), with only an estimated 20% (LaMotte, 2022) to 40% (Richard, 2018) of the population who are supposed to even experience the condition. Yet, one type of marketing content flourishes in the ASMR-community itself: the influencer endorsements or sponsored messages featured in ASMR videos (Evans et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021; Phua & Ahn, 2016).

Like regular influencer marketing, sponsored messages from ASMRtists draw their effectiveness from the content creator's follower size, originality, and sponsor salience (de Veirman et al., 2017;

Search interest over time

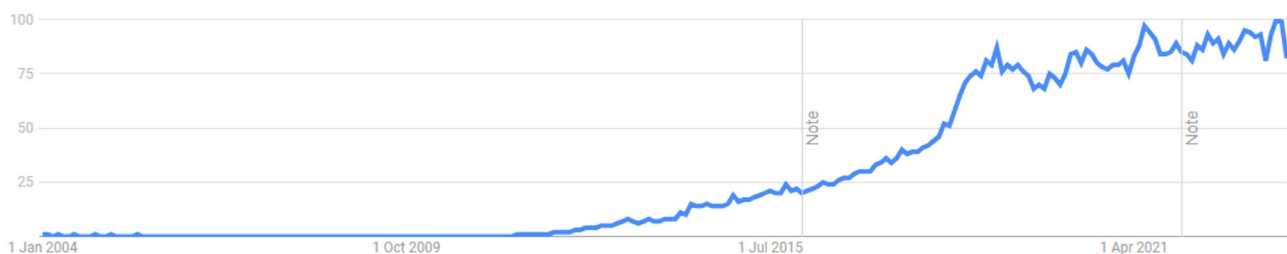


FIGURE 1 The still growing interest in the search term “ASMR” by Google trends.

Leung et al., 2022) as well as from trust and authenticity (Evans et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021; Phua & Ahn, 2016). Most importantly, sponsored messages in YouTube content emulating PSI (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with the viewers through simulated intimacy (e.g., Vloggers) have been shown to be effective drivers of positive brand evaluations and purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016). In line with these findings, Reinikainen et al. (2020) were able to show positive effects from PSI on perceived credibility and in further instance on purchase intention in typical influencer settings. Chen et al. (2021) confirm that PSI is increasing the engagement of followers with the influencer as well as their trust into them and the attitude toward the promoted brand.

Seeing how most ASMRtists fall into both categories, it would stand to reason that their sponsored messages could be more effective than those of regular influencers. But so far, no study has tried to disentangle the effectiveness of ASMR marketing from influencer marketing. As such, this paper intends to add to this upcoming literature stream and compare the effectiveness of sponsored messages delivered by regular influencers in comparison with ASMRtists. Furthermore, this research endeavor is in line with the call for further research into the understanding on potential antecedents for social media influencer-impact as Taylor (2020), and Hudders et al. (2020) postulate.

2.3 | Theoretical framework—PSI and ASMR

This paper aims to advance the understanding of both ASMR and its connection to PSI. The latter was historically mostly discussed in the context of TV or social media figures, since media consumers tend to build up a one-sided intimacy with the featured individuals, which in turn has an impact on their social and emotional behavior (Hartmann, 2017; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Kurtin et al., 2018). Content creators generally try to build up such parasocial relationships, which in turn increases PSI within their audiences (Giles, 2002). Furthermore, past studies strengthen the hypothesis that a higher PSI has a positive impact on purchase intentions—thus also offering a potential explanation for the effectiveness of advertising with ASMR (H. Kim et al., 2015; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Several research projects have already shown the effects of audiovisual content on PSI in categories such as voice assistants (Brinson et al., 2023; Whang & Im, 2021), as a by-product of film and music (Gallagher, 2016), or even in creating the feeling of social companionship through audiobooks (Have & Pedersen, 2015). However, so far it is unclear which auditory and visual signifiers aid in facilitating PSI when it comes to social media influencers and ASMR alike. Liebers & Schramm, (2019, p. 17) are emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of PSI and call on “further studies on the as-yet neglected media contexts as well as the comparison of different media” to create a “unified understanding of parasocial phenomena.” Since ASMRtists on social media platforms are not well researched so far, this research endeavor is in line with this call and compare social media influencers and ASMRtists. Beyond that, marketers and brands

need “to understand the persuasive cues related to the influencers who present their products” (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 7), to be able to react in their marketing strategies.

ASMRtist both offer insight into the effect used to foster PSI, since they “leverage binaural sounds and haptic interactions to create a form of embodied presence and distant intimacy with the viewers” (Klausen, 2019). Yet, the effect of ASMR on PSI has so far only been observed indirectly and with an “active audience” voluntarily consuming ASMR content (De Kerpel et al., 2023, p. 737). As such, current consumer behavior research on ASMR is “encouraged (...) to examine how ASMR videos affect the creator-viewer communication and relationships” (Niu et al., 2022, p. 15).

Table 1 highlights the major academic contributions in the marketing literature about ASMR in recent years. Since neither ASMR as an effect nor ASMRtists as influencers have been conceptualized in a uniform matter, previous contributions in the field were structured according to the following criteria:

- Explores Effect on Consumer: Tries to isolate the effectiveness of ASMRs advertisement by measuring its effect on consumer behavior.
- Measures ASMR: Directly measures perceived ASMR using an established operationalization instead of inferring it through consumer experience reports or exposure to ASMR content.
- Compares Effectiveness: Compares the effect of ASMR messaging on consumer behavior with established influencer messaging.
- Explores ASMR relevant Factors (like PSI): Explores the process of how ASMR influences consumer behavior in a marketing context.

This research project builds on the findings of these previous works, while providing first evidence of the effect ASMR advertisement has on consumer behavior and its relation to PSI.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 | Hypotheses

Since ASMRtists employ a distinct style of speech and presentation, it is unlikely that any other kind of influencer will cause high perceived levels of ASMR in viewers. As such, those percentages of the population able to feel ASMR are more likely to report higher levels of perceived ASMR (McErlean & Banissy, 2017) when confronted with a sponsored message by an ASMRtist. Hence, our first hypothesis is:

H1. Sponsored messages delivered by an ASMRtist show a higher level of perceived ASMR in viewers when compared to sponsored messages delivered by regular influencers.

Based on the effect model by Lee & Watkins (2016, p. 5755), we expect that all factors influencing consumers' brand perceptions and actions are antecedent by parasocial interactions (PSI) with an

TABLE 1 Overview of the literature review concerning ASMR-research findings.

Article	Method	Perspective	Explores effect on consumer	Measures ASMR	Compares effectiveness	Explores ASMR-relevant factors	Core findings
Fredborg et al. (2017)	Experiment	Consumer	No	No	Yes	No	Individuals with ASMR demonstrated significantly higher scores on Openness-to-Experience and Neuroticism, and significantly lower levels of Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness compared to matched controls. Further, ratings of subjective ASMR intensity in response to 14 common ASMR stimuli were positively correlated with the Openness-to-Experience and Neuroticism dimensions.
Roberts et al. (2019)	Mixed-method scale development	Effect	No	Yes	No	Yes	ASMR can be measured in a 15-item scale, which appears to be an effective self-report measure of ASMR propensity, demonstrating sufficient replicability of factor structure, reliability, and internal consistency across assessments. Through reliability and factor analysis, the ASMR-15 appears to meet necessary preliminary criteria for a self-report measurement instrument.
Bogueva and Marinova (2020)	Qualitative, interviews/explorative	Effect	Yes	No	No	Partially	This study investigates whether ASMR could be used to encourage pro-environmental behavior and create social bonding among young people. An ASMR video and two series of interviews with high school students were conducted in Sydney, Australia. Participants are divided in their opinion about the effectiveness of ASMR. Although all see ASMR as a completely new world in marketing, some are of the opinion that it can influence positive climate change behaviors while others are reluctant to accept it to encourage action.
Chae et al. (2021)	Quantitative, survey	Consumer	Yes	No	No	Yes	Fashion brands should use commitment, nostalgia, and brand equity when they develop ASMR-based marketing strategies. ASMR stimulants can be used as an effective way to stir up communal nostalgia in consumers. This in turn has positive effect on brand evaluation and positive word-of-mouth intention.
Niu et al. (2022)	Data mining	Effect	Yes	No	No	Yes	ASMR videos provide three experiences: multimodal social connection, relaxing physical intimacy, and sensory-rich activity observation. These experiential descriptions seek to foster future media production on a wide array of platforms that include ASMR interactions and effects.
Sands et al. (2022)	Mixed-method four experiments	Effect/Consumer	Yes (Recall)	Yes	Yes	Yes	By conducting four experiments the effects of ASMR in contrary of normal audio in advertisements are tested. The results show that ASMR is influencing positively the recall. Intensity, immersion, and narrative transportation serially mediate the effect. Initial evidence as to how ASMR can be used in advertisements to enhance recall.
De Kerpel et al. (2023)	Web-scraping, two experiments	Consumer	Yes	No	No	Yes	Both in a non-advertising and an advertising context, ASMR-experiences are associated with increased feelings of relaxation. If mediated through a flow-state, ASMR content has the

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Article	Method	Perspective	Explores effect on consumer	Measures ASMR	Compares effectiveness	Explores ASMR-relevant factors	Core findings
							potential to increase purchase intention. Video advertisements of approximately 30s are able to elicit an ASMR experience and are perceived as more relaxing when compared to their non-ASMR counterpart.
Pilny, et al. (2022)	Experiment	Effect	Yes (Intimicay)	Yes	Yes	No	This study suggests applying ASMR in the design of interactions in relationships between organizations and customers to shorten spatial distance evoked by digitization. This experimental study examines ASMR in the context of relationship marketing with a focus on perceived customer intimacy. The level of perceived customer intimacy depends on individuals' extraversion and agreeableness, and ASMR may entail the ability to positively influence this intimacy but is influenced by further variables.
Suci et al. (2023)	Surveys/ Experiments	Consumer	Yes	No	Yes	Partially	Exposure to ASMR stimuli within negative environmental messages reduces excessive fears in young adults. ASMR-tists of the opposite gender have a more significant impact on males than females. No observed effects on green buying intention were found, neither directly nor indirectly mediated by attitudes toward the ad, despite lower fear levels.
This paper	Experiment, survey	Consumer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	ASMR can be induced even by short, sponsored messages and that positively influences the perception of both the advertised brand and the ASMRtist presenting it. Although the effect is fully mediated through these perceptions, it is reliably measurable in the 20% of consumers able to experience ASMR. The diminution of anxiety, coupled with the promotion of a relaxed state through ASMR consumption, enhances PSI and positively impacts purchasing intention.

influencer. PSI is defined as the “interpersonal involvement of the media user with what he or she consumes. This involvement includes seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program's social world, and desiring to meet media performers.” (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754).

The importance of PSI has also been demonstrated in disclosed sponsored messages on YouTube (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). According to Zhao et al. (2022), consistency with one's values, emotional engagement, and entertainment motivation are central to establishing a parasocial relationship. However, due to the intimate nature of ASMR videos (Baek et al., 2018) as well as the reducing effect on anxiety (Suci et al., 2023), we expect perceived ASMR to drive higher levels of PSI and the attitude towards the message compared to regular influencers. Since not all people experience the ASMR condition, we expect only high levels of perceived ASMR to have any

measurable effect (Baek et al., 2018; Sands et al., 2022). We therefore hypothesize:

H2. High levels of perceived ASMR positively influence PSI.

Since PSI has been demonstrated to drive positive perceived brand evaluation (i.e., how much the viewer likes the brand) in regular influencer marketing, we expect this also to be the case for ASMRtists delivering sponsored messages (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Since the influence of PSI is likely not entirely driven by brand evaluation, it is expected to also positively influence purchase intention (Ha & Perks, 2005).

H3. (a) PSI positively influences perceived brand evaluation. (b) PSI positively influences purchase intention.

(c) The effect of ASMR on brand evaluation is fully mediated through PSI.

While a single sponsored message is unlikely to trigger immediate behavioral changes, past influencer marketing studies have repeatedly demonstrated that exposure to sponsored messages can positively influence the purchase intention in viewers (Hudders et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022). As such, our hypothesis is:

H4. (a) Perceived brand evaluation positively influences purchase intention. (b) The effect of PSI on purchase intention is fully mediated through perceived brand evaluation. (c) The effect of perceived ASMR on purchase intention is fully mediated through PSI and perceived brand evaluation.

The expected relationship between all the variables mentioned in the hypotheses can be found in Figure 3, showing our research model.

4 | METHODOLOGY

To assess whether there is a causal relationship between the ASMR condition and consumers' evaluations and outcomes, we have conducted two consecutive two-by-two multifactorial experiments in December 2022 as well as May 2023. We aimed to systematically manipulate the potential of a sponsored message to induce ASMR by randomly assigning participants either to a video performed by an ASMRtist or a non-ASMR Youtuber. We included a video of a male and female Youtuber for each category to account for the potential influence of gender presentation on PSI (e.g., through perceived physical attractiveness) (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The underlying study, its empirical methodology and implementation were ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of St. Gallen. The experimental setup is detailed in Figure 2.

Real ASMRtists and influencers were chosen over influencers simulated by the research team for two reasons. First, inducing ASMR both requires a special skill set (fitting voice, ear for sound quality, editing experience, etc.) and special equipment (quiet room, specialty microphones, calm lighting) (Lopez, 2018). Since being able to reliably induce ASMR in viewers is crucial to the study, two ASMRtists with a sizeable viewer base and skills attested in the comments for reading calming sponsored messages were chosen. Second, all influencers need to walk the tightrope between the authenticity of their online persona, ethical questions and their commercial needs and sponsor requirements (Wellman et al., 2020). This results in a distinct style relying on "message cues" towards viewers (e.g., production quality, sponsorship disclosure, etc.), which is hard to imitate by researchers (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 236).

To remove as many influences as possible inherent in using real creators for the experiment, we only confronted each participant with the ca. 1-min snippet containing the sponsored message. This length was shown to be effective in inducing ASMR in previous studies (De Kerpel et al., 2023). The sponsored message in all cases was for the "Raycon E25 everyday earbuds". This message was chosen because of the high consistency in messaging Raycon imposes on the creators sponsored by the brand (Bernaiche, 2021). Each message, regardless of channel, needs to mention the same product features and end with a call to action to visit the shop with a promocode for the same 15% reduction of the retail price. Although not verbatim, the message received by viewers is kept consistent between all four conditions.

The names of the influencers, their usual content, as well as their subscriber numbers were not disclosed to the participants to reduce the potential for confounders. Finally, within these parameters, we tried to include influencers that looked like their ASMRtist counterparts and demonstrated a similar level of production quality (e.g., editing, microphone quality, etc.). To account for prior knowledge of the influencers, their channels or Raycon itself, a corresponding question was included into the study.

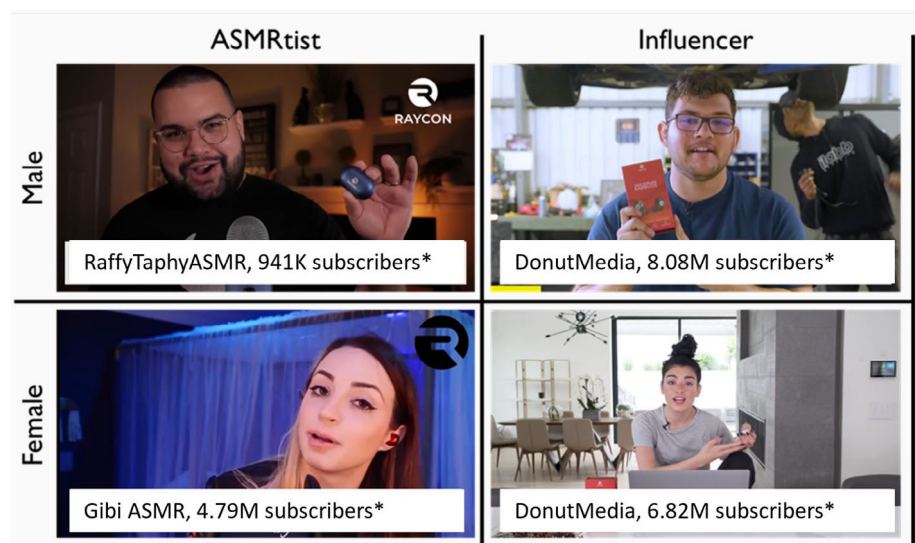


FIGURE 2 Experimental Set-up (*counted at the time of submission, summer 2023).

The data was collected in three steps: (1) A pre-test, to ensure the efficacy of trying to induce ASMR through short video messages, (2) a first survey experiment, testing all hypotheses amongst young adults and (3) a second, identical survey experiment, testing the reliability of the results amongst the general population.

The pre-test was run with a convenience sample of 26 people, collected through the researchers' personal network. The initial test showed values of perceived ASMR in line with the hypotheses and no complaints regarding technical difficulties or understanding were made by the participants. As such the survey was published without further adjustments.

The published questionnaire all study participant received was structured into four parts:

1. Information & Participation: participants were informed that they would be confronted with a sponsored message they should listen to in its entirety. They were then instructed on how to watch the sponsored message: with headphones, full screen, alone and without pause. This was done to ensure as close to ideal circumstances to experience ASMR (LaMotte, 2022; McErlean & Banissy, 2017; Richard, 2018). Their set-up was tested with an example video and a control question before they were directed to the real video.
2. Condition: the participants were quasi-randomly and equally distributed amongst the four groups:
 - a. Group 1: Male ASMRtist
 - b. Group 2: Female ASMRtist
 - c. Group 3: Male influencer
 - d. Group 4: Female influencer

The same control questions for each group were employed to rule out people with technical difficulties or who did not watch the video.
3. Scales: Afterwards, all participants were confronted with the same questionnaire. A Likert scale ranging from "1 = completely disagree" to "7 = completely agree" was chosen for all of them. To measure perceived ASMR, we used the scale proposed by Roberts et al. (2019). The scale developed by de Pelsmacker et al. (2002) assessed the attitude towards the sponsored message. All other scales, that is, attitude homophily, social, and physical attractiveness, PSI, perceived brand value and purchase intention were taken from the study by Lee and Watkins (2016).
4. Demographics: Finally, all participants were asked for their familiarity with ASMR in general, as well as their gender, age, employment, and education.

At the end, all participants were confronted with contact data of the research team and the possibility of asking questions regarding the research design.

4.1 | Experiment 1: Young adults

The first experiment was conducted using a sample of young adults from Germany, Switzerland and Austria with no hearing

problems or seeing problems and access to headphones. All participants were recruited over the research platform [surveycircle.com](https://www.surveycircle.com). Analog to the study by Chae et al. (2021), young adults in their 20's were targeted for a first sample, to ensure a level of familiarity with both influencers and social media content. All participants were filtered for their hearing and sight with a test question prior to the survey. Their age, gender and citizenship were targeted using the platform's filters and ensured through platform's completion code entry system.

4.2 | Experiment 2: General audience

Afterwards, a second sample without age restrictions was recruited over the research platform Prolific. As both Eid et al. (2022) and Poerio et al. (2018) noted; familiarity with ASMR is both more prevalent within younger generations and may contribute to how strongly the effect is experienced. Hence, to assess whether the results of the first study were reproducible with a general audience, the experiment was repeated. Same as in the previous sample all participants were targeted (no hearing or seeing loss) using the platform's filter function and assessed with a corresponding question at the beginning of the survey.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Experiment 1: Young adults

The data of the first sample's 209 participants was compiled by one researcher and later checked and prepared for analysis by the other. To ensure high data quality, all entries with technical difficulties or failed attention checks were excluded. The resulting sample of 192 participants in was compiled and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. An overview to the sample used can be found in Table 2.

The average age of the participants was 27 years old, with women making up 67.7% of the sample. However, since neither age nor gender significantly influenced the evaluated models, the sample was not adjusted further to balance for gender.

5.2 | Difference between the groups

To ensure consistency in the answers and reduce common method variance, several reverse coded items were used (Jordan & Troth, 2019). These were again reversed to test each multi-item scale for internal consistency. Afterwards, a compound variable was calculated by using the mean across all respective items per scale. Descriptive and comparative statistics for both are provided in Table 3.

The gender of the person reading the sponsored message was included as an experimental condition to check whether variables like PSI or perceived ASMR changed between the genders. However, there was no significant difference between male or female

ASMRtists or male and female influencers across all the variables measured in the sample.

As such, it was decided to merge the conditions for each category, resulting in two groups per sample: group one ASMRtist

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of the sample used for the first experiment.

Categories		% (n = 192)
Experimental group	Male ASMRtist	24.5%
	Female ASMRtist	24.0%
	Male Youtuber	27.0%
	Female Youtuber	24.5%
Gender	Female	67.7%
	Male	32.3%
Age	18–25	44.3%
	26–50	53.6%
	50+	2.1%
Job	Full-time employee	22.9%
	Part-time employee	13.0%
	Independent / Owner	0.5%
	Student	62.0%
	Retired	0.5%
	Unemployed	1.0%
Education	No formal qualifications	0.0%
	Secondary education	1.0%
	High school diploma / A-levels	16.1%
	Technical or community college	3.6%
	Undergraduate Degree (BA/BSC/other)	49.5%
	Graduate Degree (MA/MSC/other)	28.1%
ASMR knowledge	Doctoral Degree	1.6%
	Unfamiliar (1–3)	47.9%
	Familiar (4–5)	43.2%
Experience ASMR	Regular viewers (6–7)	8.9%
	Little to none (1–3.5)	72.4%
	Moderate to strong (3.51–7)	27.6%

(n = 93) and group two Influencer (n = 99). To assess our first hypothesis, the differences between the groups were assessed using an independent sample t-test. An overview across all variables between groups can be found in Table 4.

As expected, both PSI and perceived ASMR showed significantly higher values in the ASMRtist group. However, both brand evaluation and purchase intention showed no significant difference between the groups.

5.3 | Mediation through PSI

Since the comparison of means using t-tests says nothing about how ASMR could influence PSI or brand evaluation, a mediation model to assess Hypotheses 2–4 was calculated. The authors put the focus on the indirect effect ASMR is hypothesized to have. To test the indirect effect from ASMR over PSI to brand evaluation and purchase intention, an analysis of the model using Hayes' PROCESS Macro was chosen over an analysis using structural equation (Hayes, 2013; Hayes et al., 2017). A bootstrapping procedure that considers the mediating influences across all experimental condition is used to test the model shown in Figure 3.

While the focus lay on testing the proposed model, differing models using additional combinations of control variables as moderators (e.g., attitude homophily and perceived attractiveness) were also calculated—non showing any significant effects. In the final model, the significance of the standardized total indirect effect was high enough to be used as a reliable indicator for mediation ($b = .3839$, $p < .0001$) (Hayes, 2013, p. 411). All confidence intervals for the indirect effects are based on 5'000 bootstrap samples. Furthermore, the effect of perceived ASMR was almost fully mediated through its potential to increase PSI. The proportion mediated, derived from the percentage of the total indirect effect of the total effect in sample, was 78%. In accordance with the study by Lee & Watkins (2016), the effect of PSI on purchase intention is in turn mediated by its ability to positively influence the brand evaluation of the product shown in the sponsored message.

The total effect model shows a significant positive effect of perceived ASMR on purchase intention ($b = .4915$, $p < .0001$). As

TABLE 3 Study 1: T-test comparing ASMRtists to non-ASMR influencers.

Variables	ASMR message (n = 93)		Non-ASMR message (n = 99)		Overall (n = 192)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perceived ASMR (alpha = 0.950, Roberts et al., 2019)	3.43	1.51	2.45	0.87	2.93	1.31
Att. towards Ad (alpha = 0.856, de Pelsmacker et al., 2002)	3.96	1.45	3.65	1.11	3.80	1.29
Att. homophily (alpha = 0.950, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.03	1.31	2.59	1.09	2.81	1.21
Attractiveness (alpha = 0.933, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.47	1.83	2.95	1.69	3.20	1.78
PSI (alpha = 0.954, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	2.86	1.63	2.14	1.06	2.49	1.41
Brand evaluation (alpha, 0.926, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.84	1.37	3.56	1.12	3.70	1.25
Purchase intention (alpha = 0.944, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.49	1.74	3.20	1.42	3.34	1.58

Note: Bold numbers represent two-tailed significance at a .05 level.

hypothesized, the effect of perceived ASMR is almost fully mediated through both PSI and brand evaluation.

5.4 | Experiment 2: General audience

To evaluate the effect of ASMR on PSI with a more general audience, the experiment was repeated identically. The data from the second experiment contains 216 participants, none of whom had to be removed due to failed attention or technical checks. The sample shows an average age of 32 years and an equal distribution of male and female participants. As intended, the second experiment, while not representative for any general population, presents a more diverse picture in both employment, education, and gender. An overview to the second sample can be found in Table 5.

Interestingly, the number of participants familiar with ASMR is with 22.7% not much lower than in the deliberately young sample. Additionally, no clear connection between participants' age and their familiarity with ASMR could be found.

5.5 | Difference between the groups

Like in the first experiment, no significant differences between male or female ASMRtists or male and female influencers could be found. Again, it was decided to merge the conditions for each category,

resulting in two groups per sample: group one ASMRtist ($n = 104$) and group two Influencer ($n = 112$). Afterwards, the same t-tests as in experiment 1 were repeated (see Table 6).

The operationalization through the ASMRtist's sponsored messages once again proved itself reliable, resulting in a significant difference in perceived ASMR between the two groups. However, unlike

TABLE 5 Descriptive statistics of the experiment 2.

Categories		% ($n = 216$)
Experimental group	Male ASMRtist	24.1%
	Female ASMRtist	24.1%
	Male Youtuber	26.4%
	Female Youtuber	25.4%
Gender	Female	50.0%
	Male	48.6%
	Diverse	1.6%
Age	18–25	38.4%
	26–50	54.2%
	50+	8.9%
Job	Full-time employee	41.7%
	Part-time employee	12.0%
	Independent/Owner	8.8%
	Student	29.6%
	Retired	0.5%
	Unemployed	7.40%
Education	No formal qualifications	0.0%
	Secondary education	1.9%
	High school diploma/A-levels	24.5%
	Technical or community college	8.8%
	Undergraduate degree (BA/BSC/other)	33.3%
	Graduate degree (MA/MSC/other)	29.2%
	Doctoral degree	2.3%
ASMR knowledge	Unfamiliar (1–3)	36.1%
	Familiar (4–5)	44.45%
	Regular viewers (6–7)	19.4%
Experience ASMR	Little to none (1–3.5)	77.3%
	Moderate to strong (3.51–7)	22.7%

TABLE 4 PROCESS mediation model, path coefficient (standardized) in experiment 1.

	Experiment 1 model ($n = 192$)	
	Stand. Coeff.	p
a_1 : ASMR – PSI	.7075	<.001
a_2 : ASMR – BE	.0152	.8615
b_1 : PSI – PI	.2107	<.001
b_2 : BE – PI	.6116	<.001
c' : ASMR – PI	.1077	.0796
d_{21} : PSI – BE	.5211	<.001
Indirect total effect of ASMR on PI	.3839	<.001
Total Effect of ASMR on PI	.4915	<.001
Proportion mediated	78.10%	N/A

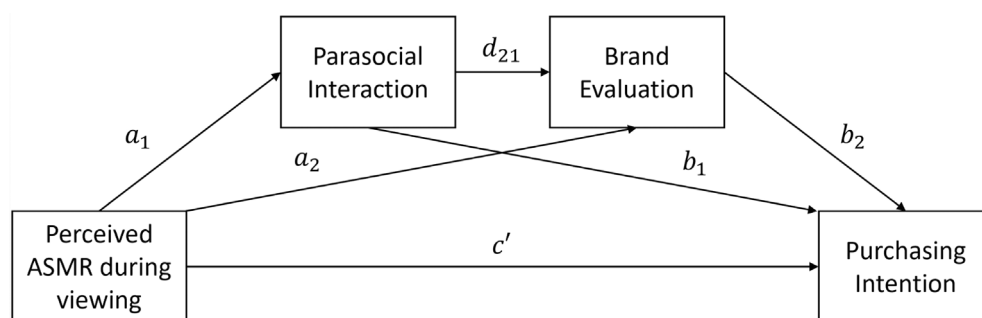


FIGURE 3 Mediation model. 5000 bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals.

TABLE 6 Study 2: T-test comparing ASMRtists to non-ASMR influencers.

Variables	ASMR message (n = 104)		Non-ASMR message (n = 112)		Overall (n = 216)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perceived ASMR (alpha = 0.943, Roberts et al., 2019)	3.13	1.40	2.13	0.76	2.61	1.22
Att. towards Ad (alpha = 0.902, de Pelsmacker et al., 2002)	4.18	1.45	4.13	1.11	4.15	1.33
Att. homophily (alpha = 0.950, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	2.98	1.29	2.91	1.28	2.95	1.21
Attractiveness (alpha = 0.942, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.60	1.80	3.25	1.60	3.42	1.71
PSI (alpha = 0.936, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	2.79	1.51	2.67	1.23	2.73	1.37
Brand evaluation (alpha, 0.933, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.90	1.22	4.00	1.21	3.95	1.21
Purchase intention (alpha = 0.949, Lee & Watkins, 2016)	3.82	1.62	3.74	1.58	3.78	1.60

Note: Bold numbers represent two-tailed significance at a .05 level.

TABLE 7 PROCESS mediation model, path coefficient (standardized) in experiment 2.

	Experiment 2 model (n = 216)	
	Stand. Coeff.	p
a_1 : ASMR – PSI	.6492	<.001
a_2 : ASMR – BE	.4519	<.001
b_1 : PSI – PI	.0928	.1036
b_2 : BE – PI	.6763	<.001
c' : ASMR – PI	.1473	.0057
d_{21} : PSI – BE	.4057	<.001
Indirect total effect of ASMR on PI	.3658	<.001
Total effect of ASMR on PI	.5131	<.001
Proportion mediated	71.29%	N/A

experiment 1, none of the other variables showed any significant differences between the two groups.

5.6 | Confirmation of the mediation model

Since the mediation model shown in Figure 3 proved reliable in the previous experiment, the analysis was repeated. The standardized total indirect effect was shown to be a reliable indicator for mediation once again ($b = .3658$, $p < .0001$) with the proportion mediated resulting in a similar 71% (Hayes, 2013, p. 411). Again, the effect of perceived ASMR is mediated by PSI, whose effect on purchase intention is in turn mediated by brand evaluation of the product shown in the sponsored message. The total effect of perceived ASMR on purchase intention is positive and significant ($b = .5131$, $p < .0001$). Details can be seen in Table 7.

In summary: the model across both experiments demonstrates that the effects of the ASMR condition on any behavioral or evaluation changes are fully mediated by their ability to increase desired parasocial interactions in the viewer. Therefore, if a sponsored message can induce ASMR, the person delivering it is likely to be viewed more favorably, which in turn leads to the viewer evaluating the

product being advertised more favorably and increase purchase intention. As such, it seems clear confirm that perceived ASMR in the sponsored messaging has a significant and positive effect on purchase intention.

6 | DISCUSSION

The results in both samples show that the operationalization of ASMR through the sponsored messages was successful, with participants confronted by ASMRtists showing a significantly higher mean perceived ASMR when compared to regular influencers. This confirms findings of previous studies which demonstrated that even short advertisements could elicit an ASMR response (De Kerpel et al., 2023). However, as expected, perceived ASMR was low across both groups, supporting the assumption, that the condition is only experienced by a portion of the population (LaMotte, 2022; McErlean & Banissy, 2017; Richard, 2018). In experiment 1, 27.6% reported feeling moderate to strong ASMR after viewing the video. In experiment 2, a comparable 22.7% reported feeling moderate to strong ASMR. Both values fit within the previously estimated 20% (LaMotte, 2022) to 40% (Richard, 2018) of the population thought to experience ASMR. In the first experiment, several of the variables varied significantly between the groups. Attitude homophily, included as a control variable and defined as “the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status” (Eyal & Rubin, 2003, p. 80), significantly differed between the groups. The same was true for perceived attractiveness, that is, the physical attributes preferred by the viewer (Ohanian, 1990, p. 42), and parasocial interactions. This suggests that the feeling of intimacy ASMRtists deliberately try to evoke (Poerio et al., 2018) in their content leads viewers to judge them more favorably. This offers an additional insight into which audiovisual signals may be used as “persuasive cues” to increase PSI (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 7), even outside an ASMR context.

However, none of the evaluations of the sponsored message itself nor of the brand or purchase intention significantly differed between the groups. Seeing that even within the ASMRtists' group only a portion of participants showed elevated levels of perceived

ASMR, it would stand to reason, that any effect the operationalization has, is fully dependent on perceived ASMR.

7 | CONCLUSION

We examined how the ASMR condition affects viewers' perception of and reaction towards sponsored messages. By using two experimental surveys, a multiple regression approach together with a series of t-tests, supported the hypothesis that the ASMR condition influences how much viewers' desire a parasocial interaction with an ASMRtist. This, in turn, positively influences the evaluation of the advertised brand and purchase intention. As a result, sponsored messages by ASMRtists showed a significantly higher level of perceived ASMR, but its effect on purchase intention is fully mediated.

In times when the reach and efficiency of traditional marketing channels are shrinking, Marketers are always looking for new and innovative ways to advertise their products and services. Influencers and trusted spokespeople have shown themselves to be reliable brand ambassadors, able to use their parasocial relationship to their fans to more authentically present sponsored messages and therefore impact the purchase intention of their followers. The same is true for ASMRtists, who are working in a niche area that is growing and therefore is getting more attention in the scientific and practical fields. In addition, ASMRtists are playing with the senses of their audience like nearly no other brand ambassadors and influencer types and can create impact on the potential decision-making processes of their audience in specific contexts.

Particularly, the diminution of anxiety, coupled with the promotion of a relaxed state through ASMR consumption, enhances PSI and positively impacts audience purchasing intention. The underlying findings of this article adds to the current literature on the new phenomenon ASMR and strengthens its ties to consumer behavior theories like the parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

7.1 | Theoretical contribution

The results of this study advance the discussion on the effect of ASMR on consumer behavior and the relationship between consumers and ASMRtists. First, the effectiveness of ASMR Marketing reported in previous studies (Bogueva & Marinova, 2020; De Kerpel et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022) is likely a distinct phenomenon from regular influencer marketing—since its indirect effect on brand evaluation and purchase intention could be measured. It demonstrates that the increased effectiveness of ASMR sponsored messages can be explained through its ability to increase PSI. Second, the experiment and the significant difference between the test and control group support the validity and suggested dimensionality of the ASMR construct and scale developed by Roberts et al. (2019). Third, the effect of the ASMR condition seems to exist regardless of the gender of either the ASMRtist or the viewer, as neither had anything effect in the tested models. Fourth, the experiment advances PSI theory by

shedding first light on which audiovisual triggers (i.e. “persuasive cues”) are effective to simulate a feeling of closeness to influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 7). It also supports the model by Lee and Watkins (2016), which uses PSI as a central antecedent to perceptual and intentional changes in viewers and adds to it, by demonstrating that PSI in turn can be amplified by ASMR.

Finally, the results also support the notion, that ASMR is only experienced by a percentage of the population. So far, it is uncertain whether the ability to experience ASMR is a born trait or if individuals can be trained to experience it. Since the exact nature and workings of the phenomenon are still up for debate (Eid et al., 2022), the effectiveness of ASMR marketing seems at the moment limited to a select target audience.

7.2 | Managerial implications

Considering the prevalence of ASMR content on most online content platforms, marketers have reason to study and understand the phenomenon. By directly comparing the effect of ASMR sponsored messages with regular sponsored messages, this study provides three main managerial implications: ASMR marketing can be used to (1) leverage trust, (2) reach new audiences, and (3) highlight sensual brand elements.

First, given that many ASMRtists foster a sense of closeness with their audience, marketing collaborations can utilize this trust to their advantage to market new or unknown products (Baek et al., 2018). When integrating sponsored content into ASMR videos, marketers may ensure that products or services are seamlessly blended into the ASMRtists' usual content to maintain authenticity. For example, Raycon promoting its headphones' deep base through their use in tapping ASMR or the mattress company Casper highlighting the softness and sleep quality of their products with sleep-aid ASMRtists.

Second, the ASMR community is diverse, with various ASMRtists fostering their own communities. Seeing how ASMR content can stimulate long-term commitment to this communities (Chae et al., 2021) and given the inconsequential effect of gender (male/female ASMRtists) on perceived ASMR, marketers are free to consider diversifying their choice of influencers to reach new audiences. For example, Nintendo of Australia chose to market their arts and crafts focused “Nintendo Labo” kits not only through gaming influencers, but also with an official ASMR video highlighting the product's tactile nature.

Finally, brands with a highly “sensual” image may use different ASMR triggers to highlight specific product features. For example, in their campaign “Oddly IKEA,” the company highlights the softness of their fabrics and the coziness of their designs through a 25-min ASMR advertisement, which was “received well” and watched in full by over three million people (Lee & Chen, 2023).

Overall, two kinds of brands should consider using ASMR content to advertise. First: brands whose products could be used by people consuming ASMR content (e.g., Raycon's headphones to listen to ASMR, or IKEA beds and Casper mattresses to go to sleep with ASMR). Second: brands who want to highlight a sensual feature of

their products in a unique way (e.g., Dove's or Lindt's ASMR Chocolate ads highlighting the products unique crunch and packaging).

7.3 | Limitations and future research

The results of this study are to be understood within the following limitations. First, considering the shortness of the sponsored messages used to operationalize the ASMR condition and the usage of self-assessment scales, only about a quarter of the variance in purchase intention could be explained. Future studies might try to use longer-form or several videos and messages to induce ASMR to gain additional insights into its relationship with behavioral changes.

Second, the sample was recruited from a survey exchange platform whose users are likely to be well-versed in technical matters and familiar with YouTube. While this was done to ensure the success of the operationalization of ASMR through online videos, it may have skewed the sample toward participants already familiar with the phenomenon. This may not affect the study results but might exaggerate the population's percentage of people able to experience ASMR. Future studies may use a representative population sample in combination with multiple triggers to arrive at a representative number of people able to experience ASMR.

Third, our results showed that perceived ASMR can increase PSI in the participants. However, the results make no statement on whether ASMR-cues could be used outside an ASMR context to increase PSI. Additionally, PSI tends to grow stronger over time, as people develop a stronger parasocial relationship with an influencer. As such, a longitudinal study design looking at long-term consumer-ASMRtist relationships may yield additional insights on how ASMR drives PSI.

Finally, the sample was focused on European participants. So far, no study has established whether ASMR is experienced differently by different cultures—but the triggers, the language and affectations used in the video are distinctly American and might therefore show varying effectiveness in other contexts. Therefore, additional studies with an American or global sample should be conducted to elaborate on whether cultural differences can be demonstrated.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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