

## On the Limits of Platform-Centric Research: YouTube, ASMR, and Affordance Bilingualism

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Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) has become a ubiquitous part of YouTube, and this research explores ASMR through the lens of affordance theory to help further define this visual social media culture. However, ASMR as a culture and community on YouTube flourishes despite platform intervention, structural affordances, and perceptions of the site’s technologies. Following a 3-year digital ethnography into ASMR on YouTube, I suggest these creator–viewer relationships are best understood through what I call *affordance bilingualism*: the dialectical interplay between producer and consumer. I invoke this as a heuristic and critical device—useful for social media researchers, particularly digital ethnographers, who seek to understand nuances and relationships within a content creation community, as well as how content is created and consumed with understanding the others’ positions.

*Keywords: ASMR, YouTube, affordances, digital ethnography, digital labor, perception, affordance bilingualism*

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), has become an international phenomenon. A community surrounding ASMR is particularly strong on YouTube, where more than 13 million videos are tagged as ASMR. Off YouTube, ASMR skyrocketed into the mainstream with a presence in a Michelob Ultra beer commercial during the 2019 American National Football League Superbowl, and in a feature-length film by Reese’s Canada that combined five prominent “ASMRtists” (the colloquial term for creators) and candy. However, ASMR and its concomitant YouTube culture remain the punchline of cultural jokes. ASMR is often used as a gag by late-night television hosts or as a social experiment by traditional media outlets (videos such as “Jennifer Garner tries ASMR” or “Cardi B tries ASMR” are common; Dickson, 2020). While ASMR is easy parody fodder, to ASMRtists, and the people who watch their videos, there is nothing satirical about this community.

ASMR existed before YouTube, and it exists outside of YouTube. But YouTube remains the primary hub for ASMRtists and viewers since before 2010 (Dickson, 2020), and a culture thrives around these videos, consumers, and producers. Elsewhere, I have written on my findings emerging from a three-year-long participant observation and digital ethnography into YouTube’s ASMR culture and community, and I discuss how ASMR on YouTube is best understood as *transactional tingles*—relaxation in exchange for likes, clicks,

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and views within the attention economy (Maddox, 2020). I situate this relationship within a hybrid form of artistic production that blurs formerly distinct models of dealer-critic and patronage systems (Maddox, 2020; Wolff, 1993). This means the successful creation of ASMR content on YouTube depends on creators constantly juggling their creative desires, audience requests, and institutional platform interference in moderation, search, recommendation, or monetization.

It is well established how media texts are given form, either harmoniously or through tensions, within the affordances of platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2015; Maddox & Creech, 2020; Postigo, 2016). But my research into the ASMR YouTube community also identified tensions and limits to this approach. As Costa (2018) points out, “social media studies have been largely dominated by a platform-centric approach that emphasizes the role of architecture in shaping uses and content” (p. 3649), and while this approach is appropriate for certain studies, my research reveals how these creators, viewers, and videos flourish on the video-sharing platform *despite* site intervention, structural affordances, and perceptions of the platform’s technologies. In other words, affordances and dynamics that work for other YouTube creators and help them achieve success are often a hindrance to ASMRtists.

Therefore, a platform-centric approach is insufficient for understanding the ASMR YouTube community, and it may be insufficient for interrogating other YouTube subcultures, the digital labor of certain creators, and how creator–audience relations function online. Instead, I follow Costa (2018) who argues “the term affordance should inscribe the possibilities not actualized by media . . . but it fails to do so because the properties that shape, constrain, or generate practices cannot be known outside their actual, situated uses” (p. 3651). Given the collapse of what “user” and “uses” mean on a site like YouTube—does user mean creator? Does user mean viewer? How does it account for times when one is both?—I use my ethnographic work into YouTube’s ASMR community to expand existing theoretical and methodological arguments into the limits and complications of affordances (Costa, 2018; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Shaw, 2017).

I propose a critical perspective called *affordance bilingualism* to account for the affordances of users and affordances of producers, as well as the times in which one is both. This is not a reductionist slip back into dualisms of producer and consumer that have been unpacked by scholars of participatory media (Bruns, 2008; Burgess, 2006), but rather the argument research into Internet practices necessitates cultural and usage specificity in deploying affordances. Furthermore, users are very rarely one thing online, and my research show many, specifically in the ASMR community, navigate platforms and communities with the knowledge of how production *and* consumption work. As digital sociologist Dyer (2020) discusses,

It has been noted that content production may actually be one of the most *uncommon* uses of social media . . . and that the majority of content production may be being done by a minority of atypical users . . . this highlights the importance of consumption in our experiences of social media. (p. 80; emphasis in original)

Understanding social media affordances must take this dynamic into account, and *affordance bilingualism* may fill this gap.

Given how so much ASMR content, as well as creator–viewer interactions, are predicated on the understanding of the other’s role, as well as how platforms may impact experience, affordances are essential to understanding creator–viewer relationships. The starkest realization of my digital ethnographic work into ASMR emerged from understanding how creators and viewers were both relatively fluent in the other’s affordance needs and relationships. I define the ability to seamlessly move between affordances of a content creator and affordances of a content consumer as affordance bilingualism. Akin to how a bilingual person can move between two languages, think and dream in one language and speak in another, and even invent their own hybrid dialect to speak, affordance bilingualism applies this understanding to the dialectical interplay between producer and consumer on social media platforms. I invoke affordance bilingualism as a heuristic and critical device—useful for social media researchers, particularly digital ethnographers, who seek to understand nuances and relationships within a content creation community.

I use my research into YouTube’s ASMR community to demonstrate how I arrived at theorizing affordance bilingualism, and I use this specific community as a methodological example for what research with affordance bilingualism may look like. To do so, this work moves in four parts: First, I outline ASMR, followed by, second, a theoretical framework into platforms, social media entertainment, and affordances that grounds my discussion. I also integrate affordance theory here through the lens of ASMR to demonstrate the need for affordance bilingualism. Third, I present findings from the production and consumption experiences of ASMR. Finally, I return to the concept of affordance bilingualism and discuss its implications for ASMR, YouTube communities, and future Internet research.

### **ASMR**

Before continuing, a brief overview of ASMR is necessary. As noted, ASMR stands for autonomous sensory meridian response, and it is a nascent term to describe an age-old biological feeling: the tingling sensation on the scalp and spine. It has been compared with frisson or pleasant paraesthesia, and ASMRtists and viewers refer to this feeling as *tingles*. Numerous “triggers” can be used to induce tingles, and these may consist of whispering or soft-spoken talk, hair brushing, tapping, magazine flipping, feathers, visual hand movements, and more (Gallagher, 2016). A similarly popular style of ASMR video is the “roleplay” type, which consists of “solicitous figure who helps viewers achieve a sense of calm and wellbeing—spa attendants, shop assistants, and librarians” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 2).

However, not everyone is capable of experiencing ASMR, and scientific organizations like the National Sleep Foundation continue to study why. However, this means some individuals may wonder why others would watch ASMR videos, as the inability to experience the phenomenon may render the videos odd and unsettling to nonexperiencers (Sweeney, 2019). However, an individual may watch ASMR videos because “ASMR has been promoted within the [YouTube] community as a solution for stress and insomnia, inducing in the [viewer] feelings of comfort, bliss, and euphoria” (Andersen, 2015, p. 684). ASMR’s whispering and soft-spoken style provides a feeling of intimacy (Andersen, 2015), and this, combined with descriptions of tingles as brain orgasms (Etchells, 2016) and the roleplay subgenre, means ASMR struggles to shed stereotypes that it is a strange sexual kink. Andersen (2015) notes that, broadly speaking, the ASMR community strongly rejects any notion that ASMR is fundamentally sexual. Sexual ASMR does exist, but not all ASMR is sexual.

In terms of the brief history of ASMR, ASMR on YouTube did not start as a purposeful hub for creators to make and share planned videos. Gallagher (2016) notes how individuals who experienced ASMR began finding each other on health forums in the early 2000s, and they began “circulating ‘unintentional’ videos (made for another purpose but effective as triggers) [and] then moved to creating their own ‘intentional’ videos” (pp. 1–2). In this move to intentional videos, YouTube seemed like the best and most likely venue, since the site had recently shifted from being a digital video repository to promoting user-generated content (Burgess & Green, 2018). However, over the years, as YouTube’s business model pivoted (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), ASMR creators *and* ASMR viewers found themselves at odds with a platform whose algorithm fails at recommending ASMR videos; accusations of sexual content and demonetization of nonsexual videos; and misplaced and inappropriate advertisements. While scholars (see Postigo, 2016) identify YouTube’s advertising system and the recommendation algorithm as useful affordances for creators, my ASMR research shows rising tides on YouTube do not lift all creators’ boats; affordances that help one type of YouTube creator may hurt another who creates different types of videos.

### **Affordances in Social Media Entertainment**

Even though ASMR’s primary goal is relaxation, given its position within networked cultures, it can be seen as social media entertainment: “An emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself (DIY) to develop potentially sustainable business based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 5). Over the years, ASMR on YouTube has shifted from what Burgess (2006) refers to as vernacular creativity, a form of amateur media production, to social media entertainment with professional content, millions of views, and sponsorships. As social media entertainment, ASMR and YouTube must be understood as both “content delivery system and networked technology” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 32), which means discussions of technological affordances, and how content moves to consumers within social media platforms, is necessary.

Within communication technologies, affordances are the qualities and features available within a technology, and they “reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects: they are properties of the world” (Norman, 1999, p. 42). Though, because platforms are not neutral actors (Gillespie, 2015), understanding affordances also means assessing how platforms and their affordances do push users toward certain types of practices and away from others (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). Affordances are not just what is enabled or constrained by technology, but how users perceive their ability to use and navigate such features. Gibson (1982), who coined the term *affordance*, found perception key to understanding affordances and whether or not something was possible in particular circumstances. Scholars in information technologies and human–computer interaction adopted Gibson’s psychological term to describe how people may use devices, but perception and relations remain key to understanding affordances.

However, my work into affordance bilingualism complicates this notion of perception by moving it past the individual and into the intersubjective. To do this, I build on the work of scholars (Costa, 2018; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Shaw, 2017) who complicate the concept of affordances. Costa (2018) points out, “social media studies would benefit from non-media centric approaches . . . that shift their focus from the analysis of a specific architecture and social media algorithm

to the practices of usage within situated environments” (p. 3643). My analysis of YouTube’s ASMR community, as well as the concept of affordance bilingualism, helps answer this call by demonstrating there is no uniformity to how creators use specific architectures, and the relationships creators and viewers have with these affordances are different depending on video genre and content. While this may be obvious for certain types of content, such as abusive, political, or extremist content, less is understood about these variances for the quotidian. This understanding necessitates affordances as constantly relational, and it follows theoretical expansions of affordances, such as *affordances-in-practice* (Costa, 2018) to stress how “affordances take place within specific material and social practices” (Costa, 2018, p. 3651); *imagined affordances*, which account for how affordances evoke “the imagination of both users and designers” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 1); and *vernacular affordances* (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) to show how people self-identify features.

Adrienne Shaw’s (2017) exploration of affordances through Stuart Hall’s (1991) encoding/decoding model is useful here, as she writes, “affordances are tied to a non-deterministic approach to how technologies are used in much of the same way an encoding/decoding model pushes back on deterministic media effects models” (p. 596). Affordances are contingent on sociocultural dynamics, as well as what an individual brings with them to their use. Extending this, Shaw (2017) writes,

A dominant/hegemonic use would likely be using an object for its perceptible affordances; here the designers’ and users’ imagined affordances align. An oppositional use might take advantage of hidden affordances or even attempt to turn false affordances into actual affordances; put differently, users might imagine very different affordances than designers . . . negotiated use exploits what were possible affordances of technologies, whether intentionally included by designers or not. (p. 598)

Shaw’s extension of encoding/decoding affordances is useful for analyzing YouTube’s ASMR community, since what are affordances to some YouTube creators are points of struggle and tension for many ASMRtists—who therefore may fall into negotiated and oppositional uses of affordances. With this in mind, I turn to the limits of affordances within the ASMR YouTube community, and a discussion of how the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional uses of affordances may occur.

### **ASMR and the Limits of Affordances**

Existing YouTube scholarship has frequently examined how affordances are key to shaping practices on the video-sharing site (Burroughs, 2017; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Maddox & Creech, 2020; Postigo, 2016). Postigo (2016) identifies six key affordances of YouTube’s architecture that contribute to this: the video upload, the commenting system, the rating system, favoriting, the subscription system, and the advertising system. Scholars (Lewis, 2019; Maddox & Creech, 2020) also identify the recommendation algorithm as a YouTube affordance that helps individuals find similar content to what they have previously viewed. While not a complete list of all YouTube affordances, these seven demonstrate how YouTube’s structure has affordances for creators and affordances for viewers. These specific affordances exist at what McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) identify as the *interface-systems level*, as well as the *interface-features level* of technologically mediated practice. These levels are where a platform’s architecture comes to the

fore, as well as the vernacular ways individuals engage with said structures (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). Regarding these affordances, Postigo (2016) writes,

After the video is completed, the commentator must release it on his or her channel. The video then enters the digital labor architecture in earnest, and all of the dynamics associated with the architecture and its features come into play. (p. 344)

This argument presumes all videos within YouTube are given the same treatment within the platform's affordances. It also assumes that creators, en masse, perceive YouTube's affordances in similar ways. However, scholars such as Caplan and Gillespie (2020), note how YouTube operates in veiled ways that create seemingly haphazard and arbitrary relations between platform dynamics and architecture, which has implications for how users view affordances. Writing specifically on the YouTube Partner Program, or the site's creator revenue and advertising system, Caplan and Gillespie discuss how YouTube offers "different users different sets of rules, different material resource and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized," and "when rules are ambiguous or poorly conveyed, creators are more likely to develop their own theories as to why their content has been demonetized" (p. 2). Postigo (2016) identifies this advertising and revenue system as one of the key YouTube affordances, but it becomes apparent that YouTube's *management* and *enforcement* of the affordance have implications for creator perception. As such, the relationships creators have with affordances, like the revenue system, can be understood through what they think YouTube may allow them to do, be it through structures or even sociocultural dynamics.

However, affordances cannot be neatly mapped onto the ASMR culture and community on YouTube. Here, I explain some of the ways this occurs and why many creators and viewers perceive the platform's affordances as being insufficient or outright detrimental to their community. These findings from my ethnography lay further groundwork for detailing the nuances of affordance bilingualism as a larger phenomenon later on. Misunderstandings about ASMR and its concomitant community mean YouTube's content moderation processes flag these videos as inappropriate for advertisers, meaning creators will not earn money off the content. As previously discussed, one of the most popular styles of ASMR videos is the "roleplay" style (Andersen, 2015), and this word means YouTube flags these videos as inappropriate, given the word's colloquial connotations—even though there is nothing fundamentally sexual about the ASMR roleplay video. This terse relationship of YouTube misunderstanding ASMR and affordances failing to work for this content came to the fore in 2018, when YouTube began removing nonsexual nonviolent content that otherwise did not violate community standards from the site. This was compounded by YouTube reaching out to PayPal to freeze ASMRtist accounts (Cresci, 2018). As Manavis (2018) pointed out in an op-ed in the *NewStatesman* on this matter, "it's becoming increasingly clear that tech companies are banning content to the detriment of their users without understanding what they're actually banning" (para 1). Similarly, ASMRtists have spoken out against YouTube's recommendation algorithm, noting correlations among having "roleplay" in a video title, demonetization, and failures to show up in the search or recommendation algorithm (Cresci, 2018). During the three years of my ethnographic work, even after these 2018 issues, creators and viewers alike continue to bemoan YouTube's treatment of the word "roleplay," noting in videos, on Twitter, and in memes how this one term often leads to demonetization. Platform sociocultural dynamics may complicate users' experiences of site affordances. ASMR, and the instances in which this content may

be banned, flagged, or demonetized, push back on the idea that content alone determines how videos travel through a site's affordances. Additionally, since recommendation algorithms and search are essential in making content visible on social media (Bucher, 2012), YouTube's failure to understand ASMR puts creators at a disadvantage for clicks, likes, subscriptions, views, and potential monetization, thus exacerbating the already precarious nature of digital labor for content creators (Maddox, 2020).

### **Creator–Viewer Relationships and Affordances**

Given the plurality of roles one may have within digital cultures, it is prudent to examine perception from a dialectical and intersubjective standpoint instead of merely from the individual's position. My research uncovered many ASMRtists are simultaneously creators and viewers of ASMR, and they make these videos for millions of others who are not creators. ASMRtists move back and forth between producers and consumers within negotiated and oppositional uses of YouTube's affordances. Therefore, ASMR *creators* engage in negotiated and oppositional uses of affordances, as they work to harness these tools to the best of their abilities despite structural limitations rooted in cultural misunderstandings. ASMR *viewers* often engage in dominant/hegemonic uses of affordances, as they work to make ASMR content more visible through favoriting, liking, subscribing, and commenting. While this split still does not yet account for what happens when an individual occupies both roles, it underscores the necessity of understanding ASMR's cultural dynamics and creator–viewer relationships to see how affordances may be understood and used.

In their work on affordances, Bucher and Helmond (2018) call for expanding the notion of the user, and they argue the following:

Taking the specificity of platforms into account requires extending our notion of the “user” as platforms cater to different users, actors or stakeholders . . . in the literature, the term “user” is often used synonymously with the human end-user, the person for who the website or app was originally designed. However, advertisers, developers, and researchers are platform users in their own right. (pp. 245–246)

While Bucher and Helmond (2018) argue this means looking at how platforms themselves mean different things to different types of users, creators are lacking here within the “user” distinction. Creators may be both producers and viewers, but a majority of viewers are often solely viewers, an idea supported by Dyer's (2020) assertion that content creation may be one of the more uncommon uses of social media.

The split between creator–viewer on the one hand and those who solely view content on the other underscores the heteromorphic nature of exchange on YouTube on the other. Digital anthropologist Lange (2019) found the platform's cultural dynamics, combined with inconsistent and highly particular affordances, means the spirit of exchange on YouTube is always necessarily heteromorphic, or asymmetrical and uneven. A heteromorphic exchange denotes how content creation and content viewership may always be at odds with each other, as viewers seek to find content that most adroitly lines up with their interests. For creators, this means that while they aim to make content appealing to the broadest subset of their audience, they cannot always account for the specificities of every individual viewer. Lange (2019) discusses how YouTube's affordances exacerbate these heteromorphic relationships, as they are insufficient for providing an even

playing field; that is, the site's affordances create flawed logic and power imbalances in this means of exchange. She discusses:

The YouTube service examines a variety of metrics in addition to subscriptions, such as watch time over a specific interval, user engagement (such as commenting) and view-to-subscriber ratios. If the ratios are off, high subscriber amounts will not guarantee monetization. (Lange, 2019, p. 126)

The affordances available to assist in reciprocity and exchange are part of the "neoliberal datafication of aesthetic feelings" (Schonig, 2020, p. 42), when, in reality, there are many more nuances to reciprocity in YouTube creator-viewer relations that can be accounted for by simple datafication.

### **Method**

Between February 2017 and February 2020, I watched more than 180 hours of ASMR videos on YouTube. Most individual videos ranged from 15–30 minutes long, and I watched at least one video almost every day for three years. Creators ranged in all ages from teenagers to middle-aged men and women. They came from all demographics, with cisgender-presenting, younger, White women as the most common creator type. In addition to viewing these videos, I commented on them, liked them, and subscribed. On the conclusion of my viewing and associated video activity, I wrote memos on the videos, which included summations of the video, top viewer comments, and reflections on the interplay of both, as well as my own experiences. I chose YouTube as the primary site for my digital ethnography, as it is the primary hub for ASMR content on the Internet (Andersen, 2015).

My video viewings were supplemented with public Twitter posts by ASMRtists because "YouTube has struggled to successfully integrate social networking features into its video content platform; nonetheless, creators have been afforded the means to harness platforms like Twitter and Instagram to more efficiently engage with and aggregate their fan communities" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 35). YouTube has failed to incorporate more traditional social networking features like easily accessible profile pages in conjunction with content, direct messaging, and personal features outside videos themselves, so it is useful for digital ethnographers of YouTube to incorporate external social media sites as supplemental to content itself, particularly when creator-viewer relations are the focus of study. Since I was analyzing not just ASMR videos themselves but also the community surrounding them, adding these tweets to my work was necessary to understand the roles of creators and viewers. Additionally, one Twitter account I pulled analysis from is an ASMR memes Twitter account that frequently interacts with ASMRtist on Twitter and highlights viewer and creator struggles. Memes function as a lingua franca that offer insights into texts, culture, and social interactions (Milner, 2016). Therefore, complementing my findings with an analysis of memes from the ASMR Memes Twitter account was appropriate to make connections between images and community.

To understand the role and perceptions of affordances for viewers and creators of ASMR, my analysis separates the two. First, I demonstrate viewer understandings of affordances, and then I discuss creators' relationships with affordances. The discussion then merges these back together to discuss affordance bilingualism.



## Analysis

### *ASMR Viewers and Affordances*

While Lange (2019) notes the heteromorphic nature of YouTube exchanges, this is not necessarily a problem for those in the ASMR community. Both ASMR creators and viewers seem aware of this asymmetry, and both parties seem generally pleased with this relationship. For ASMR viewers, the content may be approached with an awareness of the creator's labor, as well as the affordances the creator must manage. For instance, in a grocery-store checkout roleplay by Gibi ASMR (in which she performs being a grocery store checkout clerk to the video viewer), one person left the comment, "Gibi and I have a simple relationship. She puts me to sleep and she gets 100% watch time because of it" (Gibi ASMR, 2019). For this viewer, they often fall asleep while Gibi's videos continue to play. Because of this, Gibi receives increased views and a good watch time ratio, two things Lange (2019) notes are essential for successful YouTube metrics and bolstering her prominence on the site. This viewer is aware of YouTube's rating system as affordance (see Postigo, 2016), and they understand how their interactions with this affordance influence the affordance's potential for the creator. Here, the user's relationship to the affordance is not just understood in their terms and perspective, but through the perspective of another as well.

Descriptors in video titles, as well as in the comments, reveal how creators make videos for viewers' specific needs. Viewers often respond in kind by detailing how their needs were met. This shows the emotional, personal ways viewers utilize the commenting system affordance, and how this affordance is contingent on one's experiences. For instance, on a video from Latte ASMR (2018), titled, "Doing Your Lovely Pink Makeup/ASMR Makeup Artist," one commenter wrote,

This [sic] the video I fall asleep to every night, which is very hard for me since I have somniphobia [sic] (fear of sleeping) and am an insomniac. I was too scared to sleep for over two years, and often ended up succumbing to sleep at 5 or 6 AM. I used to be unable to fall asleep early, but if I switch this one on, I will calmly fall asleep within 15 minutes. Thanks for helping me, Latte. It has really helped my physical and emotional state.

Viewers may see YouTube's commenting system affordance as a chance to show appreciation and build on creator-fan relationships of ASMR (Maddox, 2020). Similarly, on a video from ASMR Glow (2018) called "21 Personal Triggers (scalp massage, wet sounds, face brushing, kisses)," one individual left the following comment:

I need this kinda [sic] pampering in real life. So thanks for this amazing video. I've been really stressed out lately and my life has just seemed off and [sic] its nice to know that I have your videos to turn to when I'm feeling down, much love!

The nuances of ASMR contribute to how affordances are used and understood within this community. Because intimacy and reciprocity are key to ASMR creator-viewer relationships (Maddox, 2020), these are tenets that also inform the relational nature of affordances in this community.

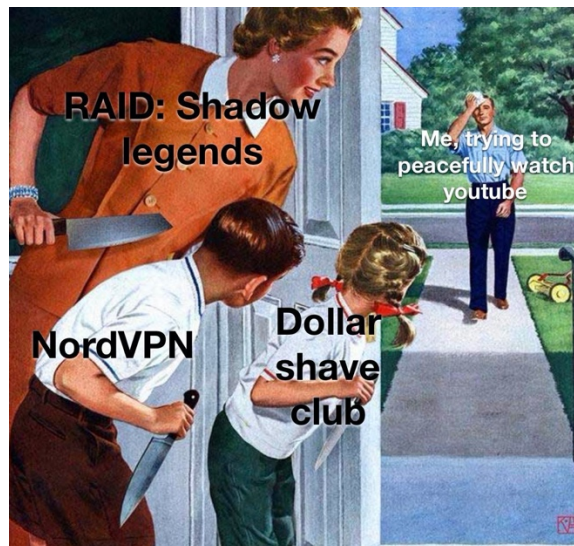
A similar site of creator/viewer relations is enacted through discourse around YouTube's advertising system affordance. On YouTube, creators can calibrate advertising settings to indicate where videos should be placed (e.g., before the video or during the video). Creators can also manually turn video monetization on and off. For creators, these advertisements are necessary to earn financial capital. For viewers, advertisements are often annoyances they cannot wait to skip. However, when there is a perceived strong bond between creator and viewer, or the viewer is an immense fan, these advertisements shift from annoyance to helpful. This one meme from the Twitter account ASMR Memes underscores this (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Viewers supporting ASMR advertising (Source: @ASMR Memes, 2019).**

ASMR viewers often understand that the advertising system is the primary affordance for their favorite creators to earn income for their labor. Because ASMR and relaxation matter to them, viewers are willing to engage with this affordance to patronize their favorite creators, and they engage with it because they understand the relationship between creator and advertising system affordance. Similarly, the nature of this meme, in which the character Thanos in the Marvel Cinematic Universe discusses sacrifice, further draws attention to Lange's (2019) discussion of attentional debt on YouTube. This meme implies that viewers make a sacrifice to support their favorite creators, and that sacrifice is not just choosing their video to watch out of all the possible options but also sitting through the advertisement so the creator is supported.

However, inappropriately placed ads are detrimental to the ASMR viewing experience. When one watches an ASMR video, an advertisement may interrupt the relaxation. This was underscored by another ASMR Memes Twitter post (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Ads interrupting the ASMR experience (Source: @ASMR Memes, 2019).**

This meme conveys how an unexpected advertisement (the women and two children hiding behind the door with knives) can ruin an otherwise peaceful experience, especially when one is not expecting an advertisement. In these instances, the advertising system affordance for creators is detrimental to the viewing experience. However, many creators seem to understand this, and they navigate the advertising system affordance knowing what will create a positive viewing experience. On this, Gibi ASMR (2019) spoke out on Twitter:

It seems like a lot of creators are having problems with @YouTube putting ads in the middle of their videos when we only have them listed to appear at the beginning. . . . I will never and have never put ads in the middle of my videos, and if there is one, something is wrong!

While YouTube lets creators choose where ads are placed in their videos, these requests are not always honored. In these cases, what benefits the creator harms the viewer's experience.

All creator-viewer relations on YouTube exist within a larger attention economy (Lange, 2019), where "successful' users are those whose online activity garners attention from their followers and networks" (Zulli, 2018, p. 140). For content creators to be successful within an attention economy, they may push ever more extreme content, even in ASMR, or they may work within the self-presentation strategy of micro-celebrity to present themselves in specific ways and curate relationships with fans (Maddox, 2020; see also Marwick, 2015). Akin to how viewers may formulate their own perceptions of how creators interact with YouTube's affordances, successful creators must concern themselves with the consumer's viewing experience and balance that with their own affordance relationships.

### ***ASMR Creators and Affordances***

The video upload system, including titling videos, is a key affordance that creators have adapted to let viewers know they care about their relaxation experience. Titling videos is one way that creators show they care about viewer perception and experience. This is specifically noted through what the ASMRtist does in their video and what type of relaxation the viewer can expect. For example, a video from ASMR Power of Sound (2019) was titled, “[ASMR] Massaging Your Face Muscles for Massive Relief,” and viewers could relax while the ASMRtist appeared to massage one’s face through the camera. ASMR Jonie (2019) titled one video “Relaxing haircut to sleep | Real sounds brushing scissors shampoo” to let potential viewers know that in this particular ASMR video, she, the ASMRtists, would be pretending to give the viewer a relaxing haircut which would hopefully help them fall asleep.

However, creators frequently express frustration with YouTube from the overall lack of support from the platform, which they note comes from YouTube not understanding what ASMR is in recommending other types of videos or mislabeling it as sexual content. A tweet from ASMRtist MattyTingles (2020) emphasizes this:

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

MattyTingles’ (2020) tweet underscores a fundamental component of this research—YouTube often, literally and figuratively, devalues content they do not understand, even if that content does not violate any community standards. It may seem paradoxical that content that does not violate a platform’s guidelines would be demonetized or banned by that platform, but this underscores how many “one size fits all” approaches to content moderation are not effective (see Roberts, 2019). Specifically, as discussed, the sexual connotation of the word “roleplay” is what triggers these actions by the platform, even though nothing sexual is happening in most ASMR videos.

ASMRtist frustrations with YouTube reached a fever pitch in January 2020, when the official YouTube (2020) Twitter account tweeted, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. #SeduceSomeoneInFourWords.” The #SeduceSomeoneInFourWords hashtag was circulating Twitter at that time, and when YouTube jumped in, many ASMR creators took this as a sign of disrespect—one, YouTube was still clinging to the idea of ASMR as sexual, and two, they were joking about a community they frequently devalue. ASMR creators responded viscerally and vocally. ASMR Darling (2020) tweeted in direct response, “ASMR as a (real) category.” Gibi ASMR (2020) simply wrote, “ASMR isn’t sexual.” ASMR Glow (2018) took the opportunity for specific demands, tweeting, “remonetize my videos @ytcreators” @ytcreators is the Twitter account specifically for YouTube creators). Articulate Design ASMR (2020) joined in, tweeting, “4 words? Understand the freaking genre,” and Scottish Murmurs ASMR (2020) used this as a moment of faux-revelation, saying “this explains why your algorithms target us (negatively) all the time.” For these creators, because the official YouTube Twitter account used its platform to conflate ASMR with seduction, or sex, this simple tweet belied what the ASMR community had tried so hard to move past to earn fairer and more

consistent treatment by the platform. For ASMRtists, this singular tweet also underscored how these creators bring millions of viewers and views to the platform, yet the platform exploits their labor, only discussing ASMR when it is convenient for them. For ASMR creators, YouTube's inability or refusal to understand the community is also a direct hindrance to the viewer experience on the site.

However, these misunderstandings prevail, as indicated by a tweet from ASMR Memes (2020) (see Figure 3).

"Alright, I removed the word 'roleplay' from the title, will you monetize my video now?"

YouTube:



**Figure 3. ASMR monetization meme (Source: @ASMR Memes, 2020).**

Because the word "roleplay" has colloquial sexual connotations, YouTube often uses this word—that is a substantial part of the ASMR community—to justify demonetizing ASMR videos. While content moderation on social media platforms does rely on certain words to flag inappropriate videos, ASMR further demonstrates the limitations of such an approach. This is why, according to ASMRtists and viewers, discussions of the platform's affordances remain moot, as YouTube continues to ignore the nuances of this community.

ASMRtists still find ways to help their content and community thrive, and this is aided by the fact many who create ASMR also view ASMR videos. With this added element, ASMRtists know what makes for a relaxing experience. Creators also use this to support one another in the community, and this is evidenced by comments ASMRtists leave on other creators' videos. On a Crystal ASMR (2019) video, fellow creator named Ghost ASMR commented, "Hand movements are one of my favorite triggers, and I love the hands you always do in your videos." In Amy Kay ASMR's (2019) personal assistant roleplay videos, she often suggests fellow ASMRtists as something you, the imaginary person being helped, can fall asleep to that night. Creators supporting creators is essential when the platform *hosting* the community does not understand it. Through taking advantage of the comment system affordance, as well as the video upload affordance, ASMRtists find clever ways to bolster their content and community.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

ASMR on YouTube is not just a place for relaxing videos. The ASMR YouTube community is a vibrant one in which creators and viewers engage in reciprocal relationships, and many understand the role of the other in sustaining the content and community. While ASMR is not the only community to thrive on social

media despite impediments from platforms, ASMR is a useful example to assess the challenges and opportunities present for creators and viewers. Similarly, ASMR on YouTube highlights how when a platform does not understand the community, those viewers and creators may be treated unfairly by the site.

With little to no support from YouTube, creators and viewers find ways to support each other, all while navigating structural affordances like the advertising system, commenting system, and video uploading systems, as well as sociocultural dynamics of the attention economy and micro-celebrity relations. In the ASMR community, creators and viewers became fluent in each other's needs and in understanding the relations the other may have to YouTube's affordances.

I define the ability to move back and forth between the relations of creator affordances and the relations of viewer affordances as *affordance bilingualism*. Content creators and content viewers do not perform their role in a vacuum or isolation. To be sure, there are probably those out there who are unconcerned with the others' experience, but success in an attention economy, or creator/viewer relations, means one must consider the others' roles to some degree. Creator and viewer roles are far from disparate and instead are more dialectic within social media entertainment. This means creators may understand viewers' relationships with affordances and vice versa, in addition to, obviously, understanding their own relationship with platform structures. There is a dual proficiency at work in the ASMR community and in how viewers and creators talk about affordances for themselves and others.

For researchers, simply stating "I examine affordances for creators" or "I examine affordances for viewers," is not a sufficient enough methodological justification given how many creators occupy both roles, or how viewers may concern themselves with creator-affordance relationships. Even if a creator is not a viewer or a viewer is not a creator, because social media communities are affective spaces (Papacharissi, 2014), in tight-knit communities like ASMR individuals may be well-versed in the practices of another. This has implications for both production and consumption. Individuals may be well-versed in the practices of another and this may impact how they view or create. For instance, viewers are willing to sit through advertisements, engage with metrics, and even financially back creators because they know these affordances are key to the creator's success. Similarly, even if an ASMRtist does not necessarily experience ASMR themselves, they still need to be concerned with the viewing experience—they need to understand how the viewer experiences the video. Creators will then need to reengage with the affordances to improve the viewer experience.

Affordance bilingualism helps to account for how viewers and creators understand the work of another within social media entertainment and how affordances may be hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional (Shaw, 2017). Affordance bilingualism helps theorize how an affordance may be dominant in one use, but for a different role in the same community, negotiated or oppositional—as indicated by the understanding of YouTube's advertising and monetization systems by creators and viewers alike. In this way, affordance bilingualism is "a weight counterbalanced to technological determinism" (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 2), as it takes into account how people use technological structures, but it does not slip into social constructivism, as one cannot do whatever they want with affordances in question.

Though, affordance bilingualism is not monolithic, and there is a fundamental asymmetry at work. As I have discussed elsewhere, relationships between creators and viewers can be terse and are necessarily asymmetrical: While viewers help contribute to a creator's success in an attention economy through continuously seeking out content they like, the creator can decide as to whether or not they create content at all (Maddox, 2020). This imbalance is also pivotal in affordance bilingualism. While ASMR creators may understand the viewing experience because they may also be viewers, viewers who are not creators can only be bilingual second hand. Viewers who are not creators may only understand creator relationships with affordance through discourse. While this does not delegitimize viewer knowledge of creator affordances, it is worth keeping in mind how creator-viewers have firsthand experience in both roles, whereas those who are solely viewers have a different framework for understanding these structures. In terms of language, bilingualism is not a monolithic phenomenon, and this is worth considering here. Some individuals may grow up in a dual-language household, or others may grow up in one country, speaking one language, and move to another, and learn that language. Other individuals may learn a language later in life, having never visited the language's country of origin. Neither experience is invalid, just different. These examples, of course, do not account for the immense variability in how individuals may learn two or more languages. Affordance bilingualism, as a heuristic, cannot account for every individual circumstance of how one may understand their experiences with affordances as well as others' experiences. But as a critical device, affordance bilingualism creates a framework for approaching how affordances and sense-making in creator-viewer relationships may take into account not just one's relations to affordances, but the other's relations to affordances as well.

This multifaceted approach to perception and relations complicates the notion of the user in digital cultures. As discussed, Bucher and Helmond (2018) call for specificity in expanding the concept of the user in terms of social media—but they leave out the notion of the content creator. While on some social media, such as personal Instagram pages, individuals create their content through uploading their own photos to personal pages (see Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020), less research examines affordances for content creators within a burgeoning attention economy and digital labor of professional vlogs, YouTube videos, TikToks, live streaming, and more. Successful content creators in digital labor must not only employ micro-celebrity as a self-branding tactic to build fans and followings (see Marwick, 2015), but they must also concern themselves with the nuances of the viewing experience. Because micro-celebrity also means fans may have an intense devotion to their favorite creators (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2015), viewers may learn about affordance woes through creator discourse, and therefore learn what they need to do to support them. Affordance bilingualism may be heightened in these micro-celebrity relationships, as creators concern themselves with the viewing experience to gain more followings, and viewers, who are fans, seek out more information on creators and try to determine the best ways to support them, so they can keep making content. Affordance bilingualism may also be a necessary maneuver for the practice of micro-celebrity, because in building a successful brand online, one may have to concern themselves with the nuances of others.

In coining the term *affordance*, Gibson (1982) considered how perception slices through the objective and subjective, and merges the two to be an understanding of what is actually available in an environment and how a user understands that availability. Affordance bilingualism cuts across platform environments, users, viewers, and enhances understandings of sense-making. Individuals do not just understand their perception and relationships with affordances, they understand the role, perception, and

relationship of affordances with those on the other side of the content exchange. This dual proficiency and fluency mean sense-making in digital culture and labor may necessarily be multifaceted and allow people to consider experiences beyond their own, something that helps maneuver considerations of social media outside of its critiques of being hyperindividualistic (Maddox, 2020).

Discussions of ASMR herein demonstrate how an affordance for a creator could ultimately be detrimental to the viewers' experiences. For researchers, content creators, and platform practitioners to understand the features they grapple with, they need to understand they are not just for creators and not just for viewers, but, as Bruns (2008) says, for "producers," who occupy a much more nuanced and complex position than simply one or the other. Rettberg's work on situated data analysis is useful here for parsing through positional specificity and understandings. Building on Donna Haraway's (1988) conception of situated knowledges, Rettberg (2020) argues that in presenting data, we always have locative understandings that influence how data are constructed, framed, and processed. While my work here is not on data presentation or analysis, Rettberg's discussions underscore the importance of research and data always coming from specific positionalities. For affordance bilingualism, it is key that researchers specify who uses the affordance, who it works for, how it works, and who may be on the other side of the affordance's use. Creators create with the knowledge of how affordances may enhance or hinder the viewer experience, and viewers may watch with keen understandings of how creators had to harness features. In examining social media affordances, affordance bilingualism is useful for situating this understanding. In discussions of affordances and how creators and viewers navigate them, we may risk occluding our perspectives and insights from a view from everywhere instead of a view from a specific, locative, project-specific *here* if we do not embrace sociotechnical specificity.

While this study offers insights into affordance bilingualism, the restrictions of platform-centric research, ASMR on YouTube, and creator-viewer relations of digital labor, it is not without its limitations. Future research may consider how affordance bilingualism works in other types of networked subcultures or other types of digital content creation. Future studies can use and interrogate the concept of affordance bilingualism to see how it functions within specific communities on and off YouTube. Simply declaring something to be an affordance of a platform is unsatisfactory given how an affordance for one may be oppositional, negotiated, or a hindrance for another. Scholars and practitioners alike must consider how understandings of affordances play into how one creates, as well as how one consumes, content in the era of social media entertainment.

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