

# CAPITALISM ATE MY SLEEP BUT ASMR BROUGHT IT BACK\* . SLEEP AS A MANAGEABLE COMMODITY IN THE AUTONOMOUS SENSORY MERIDIAN RESPONSE ONLINE COMMUNITY

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the perception of sleep in the digital culture of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), examining both viewer-listeners' online discussions about the impact of ASMR videos on their sleep and the content of audiovisual materials published on YouTube. The paper posits that sleep is viewed in two ways in the ASMR community; on the one hand, in a capitalist sense as a manageable and controllable object, and, on the other, as an element that escapes this discourse. The ASMR culture, while affirming contemporary normative sleep patterns, simultaneously invites its enthusiasts to slow down, unwind, and relax, thereby aligning itself with the slow movement.

*Keywords: ASMR, sleep management, critical sleep studies, capitalism, slow movement*

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## Introduction

At first glance, it would seem that sleep in the seclusion of our own home is the last private and intimate refuge in the capitalist reality that surrounds us. Sleep appears to be something pure, “natural,” connecting and equalizing people on some primal level. We all need to sleep, after all, for longer or shorter periods of time. Jonathan Crary (2013) perceives sleep as the last bastion of the personal and the private; and as an element that essentially defies exploitation and appropriation. Sleep often seems useless from a capitalist point of view because, obviously, in order to participate consciously in the contemporary Western society, we need to be, at least most of the time, awake and not immersed in “a state of inactivity and uselessness” (ibidem: 174).

Until recently, the activity of sleeping was largely ignored by various fields of research, including cultural and communication studies (Thurlow 2021: 789). Today, however, we can observe rising public, medical and commercial concerns regarding the activity of sleeping, sometimes connected to the current technological and digital transformations affecting highly developed societies. It seems that, in the age of capitalism, sleep has become an asset that one would like to control and an object that one would like to manage effectively. As Thurlow (ibidem) notes, “sleep (...) is by no means beyond capitalistic incorporation (...)” In this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate that the ideas of a perfect night’s sleep, in comfortable conditions and with a relaxed body and mind, permeate digital cultures and, in the form of audiovisual creations under the umbrella term of “autonomous sensory meridian response” (ASMR), are present in the online media space.

This paper indicates that sleep is understood in the digital ASMR culture as a controllable and manageable object. The creators of ASMR videos, posted primarily on the YouTube platform, promise to make falling asleep easier, putting themselves in the roles of sleep managers.

They promise an overall improvement in sleep quality and even alleviation of both mild and more severe sleep-related disorders, including insomnia.

The article posits that the practice of sleep management, which has been important in Western societies in recent years (Reiss 2017), has to some extent been reflected in the tenets of ASMR. The essay points out that the ASMR subculture, with its strong online presence, on the one hand subscribes to the dominant discourse in the capitalist reality of treating sleep as a manageable and quantifiable object, and, on the other hand, tries, seemingly in passing, to undermine this discourse by turning to the so-called slow movement, a cultural trend of slowing down the pace of life.

Admittedly, the ASMR community uses ASMR videos mainly to fall asleep (Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio, Blakey, Hostler and Veltri 2018) thus subscribing to the capitalist and market-oriented discourse that in order to remain “fit, flexible, presentable and resilient” (Gallagher 2018: 5), and to adequately work and consume the next day, one should get a good night’s sleep the night before. In this sense, ASMR treats sleep as a manageable and controllable object that one can sell and buy.

However, I will also argue that the user of ASMR videos and the ASMR subculture member is invited to challenge the rules imposed by “turbo-capitalism” (Honoré 2005): that is, to slow down the pace of everyday life, to become more aware of and attentive to their daily existence. Through the prolonged preparation for sleep performed in ASMR videos, the desire to resist capitalism, which would most willingly harness sleep into its machine, breaks through. The purpose of ASMR practices is thus ambiguous: on the one hand, this digital subculture aligns itself with what the capitalist discourse demands of consumers in the context of sleep; on the other hand, it invites individuals to slow down their lives, to calm down, to relax, to disconnect from the world.

## Sweet Insomniacs Are Among Us

The phenomenon of ASMR<sup>1</sup> and its close relationship to both quality sleep and the presumed cure of insomnia is of interest to a small number of researchers. ASMR can, of course, be studied from many angles, as the multitude of elements present in this multifaceted phenomenon is overabundant. For this reason, in this essay, I have decided to focus only on the sleep-related discourse in ASMR as it represents its under-researched component.

At present, there is a lack of literature that places ASMR in the context of critical sleep studies, a new subfield of humanities and social science addressing the cultural meanings of sleep activities across the ages. Relatively new to the online space, the ASMR phenomenon is most often studied in two academic contexts: 1) biomedical, and 2) socio-cultural (Smith and Snider 2021: 36). Researchers operating in the first context most often aim to diagnose the source of the pleasant tingling sensation felt in the body in response to various stimuli.

First of all, they wish to determine whether the origin of this relaxing sensation lies in the neurological reactions taking place in the human brain, or whether the occurrence of this feeling is, for example, influenced by the personality traits of the individuals experiencing it. Scholars

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the online ASMR community dates back to October 2007, when the first significant entry was published by a user with the pseudonym okaywhatever51838 on the Steadyhealth.com website forum. The user shared an experience of a strange sensation of itching felt not only in the head, but affecting the entire body. Forum participants responding in the thread spoke enthusiastically about this peculiar feeling and shared their own experiences. From that moment on, an ASMR community began to form, sharing videos published on the Internet that were designed to evoke this pleasant sensation. Over the years, the community focused on the YouTube platform, where channels dedicated to the creation of tingles-inducing videos were created. Today, much of the ASMR community is centered around the channels with large audiences run by popular ASMR artists, such as Maria Viktorovna from the “Gentle Whispering ASMR” channel, called “the first ASMR superstar” (Young and Blansert 2015: 81). For many of them, their ASMR channels, specifically the advertising system on the YouTube platform, is a great source of income (Maddox 2021).

interested in the socio-cultural dimensions of ASMR situate the phenomenon in various frameworks, including the gender representations and roles in published videos, such as the gendered notions of care (Smith and Snider 2019), as well as the practices of intimacy correlated with sound (Klausen 2019), voice (Iossifidis 2017) or whispering (Andersen 2015). They also focus on the creation of “digital subjectivity” in ASMR (Gallagher 2018). The research on the sleep-related discourse and its understanding in ASMR will shed new light on this subculture and contribute to the existing literature on the topic.

“ASMR” is a pseudo-scientific term for “autonomous sensory meridian response,” which usually indicates one of two things.

First, it is the term used to describe a specific tingling sensation felt on the scalp, neck, shoulders, and sometimes throughout the body, in response to different stimuli called “triggers.” The stimuli can be auditory (these are the most popular in the online ASMR community), visual, cognitive or, in the “real,” not digitally mediated life, tactile or olfactory (Young and Blansert 2015: 4). The tingling sensation is compared by those experiencing it to bursting bubbles or to a silvery sparkle felt most often as if inside the skull or on the scalp.

Secondly, the abbreviation “ASMR” refers to a subculture active in the digital space, primarily on YouTube, that produces and consumes videos created in the specific audiovisual aesthetics characterized by a soundscape composed of sounds produced by everyday objects; sounds that are remarkably crisp and clear, which “tend to be repetitive, methodical, gentle, made at a steady pace, and done at low and steady volume” (Richard 2018: 81).

ASMR videos are characterized not only by the crispy sounds mentioned before, but also by the thoughtful visuals, which consist of close-ups of objects visible on-screen, giving the impression that the viewer could even touch them. The specific ASMR style can be applied to various audiovisual materials, not only the ASMR videos produced in this

community, but also, for example, in advertising (Fig. 1 & 2). In the commercial for the Prada brand's Fall/Winter 2021 campaign, one can notice activities performed on different products (e.g., leather gloves, a sequin-covered bag, a zipper) in a close-up.



**Figure 1.** Squeezing a leather handbag in a Prada commercial

**Source:** Prada 2021.



**Figure 2.** Playing with sequins in a Prada commercial

**Source:** Prada 2021.

Female and male hands squeeze the leather products, flip the shiny sequins, zip up the zipper, stroke the soft material of the sweater – all to produce pleasurable sounds for “an exploration of the evocation of feeling” (Prada 2021), as the description under the video posted on the YouTube channel declares. Squeezing leather accessories and garments, flipping sequins, and the sounds associated with stroking fluffy materials are all popular triggers in the ASMR culture.

This amplification of the viewer’s sensual experience has always been the goal of the videos produced specifically to induce tingles by members of the ASMR culture, called ASMR artists (abbreviated as “ASMRtists”). The purpose of creating such videos is to induce the aforementioned pleasant tingling sensation in the viewer’s head, which leads to the relaxation of their entire body and mind, and consequently to falling into a blissful sleep.

Attempts to cope with sleep problems, stress, fatigue, and anxiety are reported as the most common reasons for watching ASMR videos (Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio, Blakey, Hostler and Veltri 2018). Pleasantly tingling sounds are produced in a variety of ways. The same is true of the myriad triggers used in the videos, the list of which is endless. Something different may work for each individual and sometimes it requires time to find it. As the authors of the book *ASMR (Idiot’s Guides)* note, “identifying ASMR triggers is a highly subjective process that requires a lot of trial and error on the part of the person in search of the sensation” (Young and Blansert 2015: 87).

Videos created intentionally by ASMRtists on their YouTube channels fall primarily into two large subgroups. The first consists of so-called roleplay videos, that is, videos in which the performer plays a role “imitating everyday activities such as visiting the doctor, getting a haircut or going to the library” (Klausen 2019: 88), endowing the viewer-

listener<sup>2</sup> with the stimulus of so-called “personal attention,” an emblematic trigger for the ASMR culture. The intention of such films is to produce the experience for the viewer-listener as if someone is tenderly caring for them, and helps them fall peacefully asleep. The second subgroup consists of videos in which objects, or inanimate actors, rather than people are in the foreground. In such videos, objects from the so-called “sound assortments” (Klausen, 2019, p. 88) visible in the near distance are subjected to various treatments: they are at times scratched, stroked, tapped, caressed, squeezed. All this is done in order to produce pleasant sounds intended to have a soothing effect on the viewer-listener of the video.

The figures below show the differences between the videos from both subgroups. Figure 3 presents a still from a video published on the YouTube channel “asmr zeitgeist.”



**Figure 3.** Rubbing the microphone with silicone balls

**Source:** asmr zeitgeist 2020.

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes I call ASMR users “viewer-listeners” (Klausen 2021) instead of either “viewers” or “listeners” to emphasize the multisensory perception of ASMR content, as well as the importance of both visuals and the audio track in the analyzed videos.



Here, one can see male hands holding spiky blue silicone balls and rubbing them against the microphone. The main focal point of this frame is the inanimate elements set in motion by the performer's hands: the balls and the microphone with a digitally generated cute face with heart-shaped eyes.

Figure 4 shows the female creator of the "Creative Calm ASMR" channel playing the role of a flight attendant. The frame is dominated by a woman's gently smiling face. She is offering the supposed passenger various standard services on the aircraft, always speaking in a soothing, calm, professional voice.



**Figure 4.** Flight attendant taking care of a passenger

**Source:** Creative Calm ASMR 2019.

Regardless of which category a given ASMR video falls into, one of its goals is to manage the sleep of the viewer-listener, including curing them of ailments associated with insufficient sleep. The creators of ASMR videos and the members of the community consuming the videos make explicit statements about this purpose, discussing, for example, in the comments section below the videos, the salutary effect of the

given material used by them in bed just before going to sleep. This purpose of ASMR is also evidenced by the titles of the videos and their descriptions posted by the performers. They often include promises made by the ASMRtists to the viewer-listeners about falling asleep quickly and sleeping undisturbed through the night or even curing insomnia, as well as wishes for sweet dreams (Łapińska 2022). The creator of the “asmr zeitgeist” channel even calls his subscribers “insomniacs” or, more affectionately, “sweet insomniacs,” thus contributing to the sleep discourse of the ASMR culture.

### To Sleep, or Not to Sleep, That Is the Question

The topic of sleeping activity through the ages has recently been addressed within critical sleep studies, an emerging subfield of humanities and social science. Benjamin Reiss (2017) asks how societies organize themselves around the biological requirement to sleep, known to every human being. What social arrangements have developed over the centuries around the activity of sleeping? What do normative sleep patterns look like nowadays, and how have they changed throughout history? Who controls the activity of sleeping in the contemporary capitalist reality and under what conditions?

The school that Reiss (2014) calls “capitalism-ate-my-sleep” in his article on the socio-cultural meanings of sleep activities in Western societies, and whose representatives are supposed to be Crary (2013), Alan Derickson (2014) and Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer (2012), is concerned with the complex relations between sleep, work and capitalism. In their books, the aforementioned authors describe a rather pessimistic view of the relationship between late capitalism and the sleep activity of members of Western societies.

For example, Crary states that capitalism still has trouble managing sleep effectively. For, at first glance, sleep seems to be the enemy of

capitalism since when we sleep, we spend our time unproductively, that is, we do not consume the goods produced. Thus, for Crary, sleep is seemingly the last barrier that capitalism seeks to overcome so that in the future one may not need to sleep at all. Capitalism would eagerly pursue the idea that sleep will someday become a completely manageable asset; something that can be measured and normalized, and, if necessary, artificially induced or reduced to a minimum. Crary argues that eventually nothing escapes the power of capitalism; unfortunately, this includes sleep.

Contributors to critical sleep studies indicate that what we now consider a “normal,” healthy sleep pattern, that is, getting about seven or eight hours of uninterrupted sleep during the night, is a fairly recent phenomenon that emerged with the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and was the result of the advent of new work schedules for laborers. Wolf-Meyer (2012) explains this phenomenon with the term “consolidation of sleep,” referring to the concentration of shorter periods of sleep time, common in the pre-revolutionary period, into a single eight-hour block of sleep, which was now considered the “normal” way of sleeping. Reiss (2017: 386) states that these types of “established Western sleep patterns” have now become “global norms.”

Other ways of sleeping are considered deviations from the norm, promptly converted into sleep disorders that need to be treated. Another issue that Reiss discusses is the so-called “sleep pressure” put on “sleep’s rhythms, environments, and configurations” (ibidem: 31) that exists in the consciousness of every person who is aware that they will have to go to bed at some point in their day. This causes all human activities to subconsciously organize themselves around this basic need to sleep, or, more generally, around the people’s pressure to remain a healthy, fit, “normal” and properly functioning member of society. This pressure must always be taken into account because of the structure of society or the way all sorts of institutions operate. Individuals who are

unable to conform to the rules of “normal” sleep are advised to actively seek help from somnologists or sleep psychologists operating within sleep clinics and laboratories to combat their non-normative behavior. Sleep, then, is treated as an object that can be effectively managed to match patient-client expectations.

However, Reiss and the other authors mentioned above agree that human sleep is in fact very flexible and that sleep patterns can vary; therefore, it is hard to speak of any “normal” behavior in this context. One should be aware that the way people sleep in today’s capitalist Western reality was not considered the norm two centuries ago; nor is it the norm in other parts of the world nowadays.

How does the digital culture of ASMR fit into the discourse about sleep presumably being a manageable object? As I have already noted, the videos circulating in the ASMR community were, from the beginning, treated as a kind of remedy to help community members, among other things, fall asleep quickly. This is evidenced not only by the content of the videos, their titles, and the descriptions created by the performers, but also by the statements made by members of the community in online forums and in the comment sections of the videos posted on YouTube. These individuals often bear witness to how the video has helped them solve some of their problems with falling asleep.

As already noted, the few research studies of ASMR audiences also support the claim that videos are used to induce sleep (Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio, Blakey, Hostler and Veltri 2018). In the next section of this essay, I will analyze one example of a video in which a performer plays the role of a person tucking the viewer-listener in bed before they go to sleep to ensure they get quality slumber. The analyzed video was selected as one of the most representative examples of the so-called “Tucking you in” roleplay subgenre.

The channel on which the video was published is one of the most popular ASMR channels (*70 ASMR YouTube Channels*, 2022), with 1,61

million subscribers.<sup>3</sup> I was keen to select a video for the following online ethnographic study that is both a popular and a typical representative of the subgenre.

For this study, I have also read all comments posted under the analyzed video, purposefully selected and specifically examined the illustrative ones related to the perception of sleep in ASMR to see how the viewer-listeners discuss their sleep-related experiences. I will conclude the essay with a reflection on whether the ASMR culture enforces normative patterns about sleep served up in the Western capitalist discourse, or more often invites a person to slow down the pace imposed by “roaring turbo-capitalism” (Luttwak 2000: 1).

### “Tonight, I’m Going to Make Sure You Sleep Well”

On the screen, one sees a close-up view of a young woman wearing a gray, fluffy sweater. Her neck is adorned with silver chains, her brown hair pinned back in slight disarray. The woman sits in a room with walls of a warm peach color. The first words one hears coming from her mouth are: “Are you feeling comfortable?” – and it is a question addressed directly to the camera, that is, to me, the viewer-listener whose point of view the camera’s eye has taken. With a gentle smile on her face and a quiet, reassuring voice, the woman evokes the notion of a lovable “girl next door” who may be a close friend of mine.

The woman reaches her hand behind the camera, giving the impression that she is arranging something around it (Fig. 5). A moment later it is revealed that this activity was meant to resemble draping a blanket around me lying in my bed. The girl is still smiling, spreading a mother-like aura of care, commitment, warmth and intimacy around her.

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<sup>3</sup> Data from May 2022.

At the back right of the frame, behind the woman's body, one can sometimes see a metal lamp with crystal ornaments hanging from it and exposed bulbs that cast a smudged shadow on the wall and give off a muted, warm light gently coating the woman's figure. From the women's whispered expressions, it appears that the space we share is intended to represent my bedroom. The woman reminds me that last time I confided in her about my sleeping problems. Now, she instructs me not to worry, as she happens to be a sleep specialist and will happily do her best tonight to make sure I sleep through the night comfortably, safely, and in a cozy environment.



**Figure 5.** The sleep specialist tucks me in

**Source:** ASMR Glow 2019.

This is how the video, published on the YouTube channel “ASMR Glow” under the title *ASMR Tucking You In (Fire crackling, Skin care, Soft Sounds, Ear Brushing, Hair Play...)*, begins (ASMR Glow 2019). It has been viewed more than two million times and commented on more than

1,600 times.<sup>4</sup> What happens next in the scenario? Apparently, this is not the first time I have turned to this friendly, gently smiling girl for help. For she states several times during the relaxation session, which lasts over forty minutes, that she knows my preferences about what I find pleasurable and what I do not (“I know you find it very relaxing,” she remarks, for example).

Thus, in this scenario, we are apparently close, knowing and trusting each other; after all, we are sitting in one of the most private parts of my apartment, my bedroom. During the session, the woman performs various actions designed to make me relax and fall asleep quickly. She lights a large candle covered with a wooden lid, the sound of which is reminiscent of a burning log in a fireplace, and then brings me a cup of warm milk, saying, “I promise it’s extremely effective” (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6.** A cup of warm milk as a remedy for sleep problems

**Source:** ASMR Glow 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from May 2022.

Then she attends to my body, especially my head and face: she wraps me even more tightly in a warm pink blanket, combs my hair with a hairbrush, touches my face with a warm towel and cotton pads, applies some cream, and puts a gel mask over my eyes. At the end of the session, she also decides to read me a bedtime story. She brings in an old heavy book with decorative gilding on the leather binding, which when tapped with the tips of the fingernails makes a pleasant sound (Fig. 7).



**Figure 7.** Presentation of the fairy tales book

**Source:** ASMR Glow 2019.

As the relaxing session (and thus the video) draws to a close, the image becomes blurrier and the girl's whispering increasingly indistinct. I am no longer able to distinguish the individual words being read from the book. At this point the performer uses a trigger very characteristic for the ASMR culture called "inaudible whispering"; she speaks in such a way that it is impossible to decipher the meaning of individual words, which merge into one stream of sounds. I close my eyes and fall asleep.

The video belongs to the "Tucking you in" roleplay subgenre popular in the ASMR culture, where the performer takes on the role of a person



preparing the viewer-listener for sleep. Sharon, the channel's author and creator of the video, hints several times during the ASMR session that her task to relax me is like a regular job. In the first minute of the video she has already said, "I am a specialist about sleep so don't you worry about that [=about falling asleep]." The woman is clearly very efficient at what she does and has a lot of experience in her "industry." As she removes a warm towel from my face, she shares a reflection on the undeniable usefulness of doing work such as this. Sharon remarks that it would be "great" if there really were a job involving "just pampering people" in the way she is performing it during an ongoing ASMR session.

This kind of emotional labor performed by women is nothing new. Arlie Russell Hochschild, in her seminal book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (2012), describes women in the labor market who are trained from a young age to do emotional work that is supposedly natural to them. The scenarios proposed in ASMR films seem to support the thesis that women are predisposed to provide care, show tenderness and love, offer help and support. A significant number of ASMR artists are women who consciously use such stereotypical representations in their performances, and their videos "are constructed around helping, soothing or reassuring scenarios" (Smith and Snider 2019: 5).

In the case of the film in question, however, the artist combines several roles in her performance: a mother tucking in her child and reading them a story before they go to sleep, a friend offering support in a problematic situation, a professional whose job is to "pamper people," and a sleep specialist or sleep scientist responsible for managing sleep activity. It is intriguing to see this kind of, admittedly rather timid and probably accidental, attempt to go beyond the typical discourse prevalent in the ASMR culture that associates women with "classically feminine tenderness" (Gärlid 2015: 33), domesticity and care, and places them

in the professional context of the sleep industry that is growing every day.

Clinics treating all sorts of aberrations related to “normal” sleep are extremely popular in the Western world these days, most notably in the United States, where, according to estimates, there are around 3,000-3,500 sleep labs (Greaney 2018: 183). The rise of the sleep management industry is a clear byproduct of the capitalist idea of normalizing human sleep that I mentioned earlier. One of the tenets grounding the ASMR community is the belief that sleep can be managed, that is, that through the right actions and activities conducted at the right time, place, and favorable circumstances, it can be induced and controlled.

Does this mean that the ASMR culture nurtures and unreflectively reproduces the capitalist discourse on sleep? Both yes and no. On the one hand, ASMR scenarios allude to the creations and ideas reworked within the sleep industry, acknowledging the existence of aberrations in prevailing sleep patterns. They offer, for example, a remedy for insomnia caused most often by the pace of life in the reality of global capitalism. On the other hand, ASMR situates itself as if in opposition to the “predatory” and “roaring” version of capitalism presented by Crary that insists that humans ultimately sleep as little as possible. The ASMR community, after all, wants us to sleep *more*, not less. It also seems to crave a slower pace of life and higher degree of relaxation.

Let us now examine some of the comments posted by the viewer-listeners under the *ASMR Tucking You In* video to check how community members discuss their experiences with ASMR in the context of sleeping problems. One of the comments left under the film reads as follows:

For quite some time now, I've struggled with sleeping. Sometimes I sleep like a log, other times I have a hard time falling asleep. Now I'm in one of those periods where I have trouble sleeping. I heard about ASMR and thought I'd check it out. It worked on me. *I fell asleep quickly that night* [emphasis added – J.Ł.]. The next night I searched

for other videos, and then this video turned up. My immediate thought was «oh my god she's beautiful!» I clicked it, and was so surprised at how it made me feel. You have no idea how good this video made me feel, and still does today. It genuinely feels like you're in my room taking care of me. Obviously that's the point, but I never thought I'd feel that way from a YouTube video. *I checked out more of your videos, and now I'm hooked. I need your videos every night* [emphasis added – J.L.]. [...] plus you're super adorable! *So now you're responsible for me getting good night's sleeps, and I'm very grateful* [emphasis added – J.L.]. [...] There was another video where you were humming, and that was just magical. [...] thank you for making my nights (and days) easier.<sup>5</sup>

In the comment above, a member of the ASMR community speaks in superlatives about the video they watched. The commenter not only confirms what has been established through analysis of the video, including the fact that a performer looking like a likable “girl next door” or a friend (the commenter states that the performer is “beautiful” and “super adorable”) seems to be thoughtfully “taking care of” the viewer-listener in their bedroom, but also attests that this video “made them feel good.”

Moreover, the commenter states that the ASMR videos found accidentally on the Internet that night when they were having trouble falling asleep, worked in such a way that, surprisingly, they made them doze off very quickly. Then, the viewer-listener notes half-jokingly and half-seriously that, since then, they have become addicted to the ASMR videos published on the “ASMR Glow” channel and need them every night, which now renders Sharon responsible for providing the content that ensures a good night's sleep.

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<sup>5</sup> In all quoted user contributions, the original spelling, grammar and punctuation has been preserved, where possible.

It seems quite interesting to set this thread within the capitalist culture of consumerism; one can risk a statement that the user of a given video has become a consumer whose need has been created and now has to be filled. As Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 31) points out, “new needs need new commodities; new commodities need new needs and desires.” The need for a normative slumber that conforms to the dominant discourse drives the creation of commodities that are capable of satisfying this need.

Thus, the comment confirms my argument about the ambivalent status of sleep in the digital culture of ASMR. In the user’s statement, sleep, on the one hand, appears as an easily manageable commodity; on the other hand, it remains something elusive, not amenable to imposed norms (the user, after all, *could not* fall asleep, despite the desires of both themselves and their culture), with an almost “magical” status. The ASMR artists and their on-screen alter egos in the form of sleep specialists manage the viewer-listener’s sleep, but they do so in a way that cannot be reduced to a simple formula. There is a pinch of magic in ASMR that some scholars call “affect”: peculiar and ungraspable “shimmers” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 2) eluding language, cognition, and easy explanation (Łapińska 2021).

Let us read another comment posted under the *Tucking You In* video:

[...] Each time I watch your videos, not even ten minutes in, I’m falling asleep. This is the effect your asmr videos have on me, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that. *Especially since as a teacher, I have to be up early and it’s very difficult for me to get to sleep at an appropriate time* [emphasis added – J.Ł.] because of all the grading I do. [...]

Here, the commenter affirms the usefulness of the video they watched in terms of managing their sleep so as to fit into the norms imposed by the capitalist reality of the twenty-first century. The person attests in their statement to the existence of a specific “set of social norms that

governs much of what we think about sleep” (Reiss 2017: 48). The person commenting is a teacher, which, obviously, entails a certain top-down dictated daily pattern and mode of functioning. The comment reads that this person’s sleep activity, according to them, should commence “at an appropriate time.” The same is true of other activities (“the grading”) associated with playing an appropriate role in a social institution, in this case a teacher in a school: they must fit into certain time frames and structures. The commenter attests to the aforementioned “sleep pressure” that they experience on a daily basis, the effect of which is mitigated by the videos published on the “ASMR Glow” YouTube channel. Thus, the normative sleep pattern dictated by the demands of capitalism is not always easy to follow and can cause difficulties in aligning with, for example, institutional schedules.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from other comments left under the *Tucking You In* video, in which their authors address their sleep problems caused by the rigid time frames at work or school:

I’ve always worked 3rd shift and had issues sleeping and relaxing. ASMR has helped so much. Thank you.

Thank you it’s the day before school and I need sleep, this is helping.

ASMR is treated in the above statements as an effective remedy for sleep problems. The authors of the comments thank the creator of the video, which they find extremely helpful. Adherence to social norms related to the act of sleeping becomes easier with ASMR.

In other comments, compliments are repeated time and again about the relaxing quality of Sharon’s film. The audience emphasizes that the video helped them slow down. Such statements echo a longing for slowing down the pace of everyday life in modern reality. For modern society is an “accelerated” society, and “the speeding up of everyday life is seen as a central temporal feature of ‘modernity’” (Freund 2010: 112). The response to this type of acceleration would be the slow movement “challenging contemporary temporal rhythms” (ibidem: 119), including

modern-day sleep–wake cycle, which has emerged in recent decades, primarily in Europe. This movement, challenging the cult of speed, would in its general tenets wish “to fix our neurotic relationship with time itself” (Honoré 2005: 49).

It seems the digital culture of ASMR is committed to slowing down the pace of our everyday existence and finding a place in our lives for the necessary sleep. This is evidenced not only by the statements of the video users, but also by the audiovisual content of the published materials, which both imposes increased attentiveness (prompted by the whispering used by ASMR artists; as one always has to make an effort to be more attentive in order to understand the whispered utterance) and frequently tests the patience of the viewer-listener who is accustomed to rushing everyday (as the videos are often very long, and the script unfolds at a snail’s pace). As evidenced by the comments above, some viewers fall asleep as soon as they turn on the ASMR video; however, others appreciate the relaxing effect of the video all the way to the end.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that dreams of finally having a good night’s sleep pervade digital reality and find expression in an online culture and community called ASMR. It appears these dreams are a natural consequence of how sleep has been conceptualized in the discourse of the capitalist modernity that constitutes the everyday life of societies of the Western world. The ideal sleep pattern, which consists of elements such as, among other things, “sleeping in private, consolidating one’s sleep at night, routinizing sleep behaviors” (Reiss 2017: 234), shapes the digital social reality. Members of the ASMR community are concerned with the need to ensure peaceful sleep for themselves and others. They also desire relaxation, rest, and a slowing down of the frenetic pace of life, thus indirectly paying homage to the cultural trend of

the slow movement. ASMR also reflects the ambiguous status of sleep in contemporary reality, which, on the one hand, appears in the capitalist spirit as an easily manageable and controllable commodity, and, on the other hand, still remains something mysterious, elusive and a bit magical.

Therefore, it is not entirely true that after “capitalism ate our sleep,” ASMR came to the rescue and returned to us some sort of primordial, pristine, and dreamlike version of sleep. Notably, the online culture of ASMR quickly adopted a normative view of sleep, while at the same time attempting to cultivate the value of unhurried slumber.

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