Digital Intimacy: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis on ASMR Videos

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Abstract

The rapid development of science and technology provides a powerful impetus for the renewal and iteration of social media. And in the last three years, the COVID-19 epidemic has promoted the development of online social products while widening the offline social distance. Digital cultural consumption has become the new engine of China's economic development. ASMR, autonomic sensory meridian response, is a classic but unusual case. Just as a bunch of scholars mentioned, ASMR which mainly uses situational simulation to get people immersed in a virtual environment, is intimate. Therefore, backed up by visual grammar, this thesis aims to find out how ASMR videos construe digital intimacy in visual mode. The present study shows that the rules of visual grammar conform to the meaning construction of ASMR videos and ASMR videos all index intimate digital intimacy. Besides, this thesis also concludes the producer's major ways in the construction of digital intimacy in visual mode. By analyzing the selected ASMR videos, the present study may serve as an exploration of ASMR researches, and be propitious to elaborate the construction of digital intimacy.

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Keywords

Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Digital Intimacy, ASMR Videos, Visual Grammar, Interactive Meaning

1. Introduction

1.1. Digital Intimacy

Interpersonal intimacy is considered to be the core of comfortable communica-

tion. And it can be defined as an exchange of private information including the sharing of verbal or nonverbal behaviors, psychology, emotion or cognitive experiences (Prager, 1995 [1]). Intimacy is an emotion defined by society and culture, or a way to build a relationship including the allocation of responsibilities and resources, the form of commitment and the goal of the relationship (Corse & Silva, 2017 [2]). And this relationship is based on trust and love.

Researches on intimacy can be traced back to 1940 (Cui Yichen & Wang Mingli, 2005 [3]), and early researchers paid more attention to the clinical mental treatment of intimacy, and clinical psychologists have found that intimacy plays an important role in the treatment of psychological diseases, which has important research significance. In recent years, theories and researches on intimate relationship have gradually become an indispensable part of social cognitive psychology and clinical psychology.

With the gradual rise of social network and communication technology, it has become a mode of modern social communication to establish network relations (Ward & Tracey, 2004 [4]). Online intimacy has also emerged as the times require, which has become a noticeable phenomenon in the process of establishing network relationships (Meng Qingdong, Wang Zhengyan, 2009 [5]). In 2013, Jamieson updated her own theoretical work on intimacy to adapt to the digital age, which means intimacy changes from coexistence to copresence in decentralized social networks [6].

The term "digital intimacy" usually has two dimensions: one refers to the frequent, continuous and deep connection between people and the Internet, which is that many aspects of life are gradually inseparable from the Internet and related technologies and platforms; another dimension refers to the intimate relationship between people mediated by Internet technology (Wang Xin 2019 [7]). This thesis mainly refers to the second dimension, that is, the digital intimate relationship between individuals.

1.2. ASMR

ASMR, autonomic sensory meridian response, is usually described as tingling or shivering experience on the scalp or along the spine. And it can be felt when exposed to whispering, tapping, and other visual and aural stimuli (Barratt & Davis, 2015 [8]; Michele, 2021 [9]). They mainly use situational simulation or aural stimuli to get people immersed in a virtual environment. While this sensation is not new, ASMR has only recently been recognized and named (Rebecca, L. S., Tianxiao, W. & Christian, G., 2020 [10]). And the term ASMR is coined in 2010 (Allen, 2016 [11]). As a result, ASMR videos pour in and researches on them has sprouted accordingly including disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, medicine, communication and other fields.

At present, researches in the fields of psychology, neuroscience and medicine mainly focuses on the trigger factors and adjuvant therapy of ASMR. For example, Barratt and Davis (2015 [8]) studied the normal trigger factors of ASMR: whispering and crisp sound, and their data also showed that ASMR can improve

the symptoms of depression and chronic pain to some extent. Kovacevich and Huron (2018 [12]) also suggested that ASMR has a certain inhibitory effect on anxiety and depression, and has become an increasingly popular self-help therapy. Cai Guiyuan, Shi Yu and Wu Wen (2020 [13]) observed the EEG spectrum characteristics of ASMR and revealed the neural mechanism of ASMR from the perspective of neurophysiology. Fredborg (2021 [14]) and others described the changes of neural activity related to them by allowing participants to receive stimuli that triggered ASMR and non-ASMR control, and proved the mechanism of ASMR. Wang Xieshun, Yang Xinyue and Su Yanjie (2021 [15]) summarized the causes of tingling and positive emotions in ASMR, and thought that the high activation of brain regions related to emotions and rewards and the decrease of heart rate and respiratory rate may be the important reasons for the sense of happiness and relaxation.

Researches of communication mainly focus on the sound characteristics and digital intimacy of ASMR.

In the study of sound characteristics, Miranda *et al.* (2017 [16]) cooperated with female anchors in radio programs to explore the practical application and cultural value of soft sound represented by ASMR in different spatial scenes from the perspective of sound art practice. Ik-Soo Ahn *et al.* (2019 [17]) recorded the sound of pencil writing with a digital condenser microphone in a quiet recording studio, and analyzed it with an acoustic analysis tool to study the direct influence of pencil writing on human feelings.

In the study of digital intimacy, Emma Leigh Waldron (2016 [18]) explored how to establish digital intimacy through media and devices by analyzing the video content and emotional experience of ASMR. N. Smith (2018 [19]) and others think that ASMR is a sensory response, which makes users feel intimate and comfortable with the media, and this emotional experience is consciously constructed and strategically enhanced. Paula Clare Harper (2019 [20]) pointed out that the detailed description of the interactive objects by ASMR performers is helpful to cultivate the intimacy between the audience and the performers. Zappavigna (2020 [21]) also proposed that ASMR aims to establish digital intimacy with the audience through their feelings. Rebecca *et al.* (2020 [10]) pointed out that ASMR performers all expressed intimate emotional positions.

In short, as a new thing, ASMR is still in its infancy, and this research gap deserves our attention. This paper intends to analyze the digital intimacy in ASMR videos from a linguistic point of view. In addition, since ASMR video belongs to multimodal discourse, in order to make the analysis more comprehensive, this paper will analyze the digital intimacy in ASMR video from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis. And the study aims to find that how is digital intimacy constructed in visual mode of ASMR videos.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach

Based on visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 [22]), the study will em-

ploy a quantitative approach to hold a case study of digital intimacy in 3 ASMR videos.

2.2. Data Collection

The data was collected from YouTube according to the rating. For the sake of concreteness, the author chose the former 3 videos to make an analysis. (Table 1)

Table 1. Data simples.

No.	Title	Length
1	ASMR Pure Clicky Mouth Sounds for Sleep Hand Movements	10'19"
2	ASMR … Testing you for ADHD (interactive)	11'30"
3	SCP Foundation Creature Examination You're SCP-330 ASMR	20'59"

3. Theoretical Framework

With the support of three functions in Halliday's functional grammar (2014) [23], Kress and van Leeuwen initiated three meanings accordingly to deal with visual mode. To analyze the digital intimacy, this thesis will focus on interactive meaning because of its communicative feature.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the represented symbols and audience, and relates to contact, social distance, and perspective.

3.1. Contact

In visual grammar, visual discourses express their meaning through image act which consists of demand act and offer act.

Demand act is typically featured with the direct gaze from the represented symbols to audience. In this situation, the represented symbols can be persons, animals, or any personified objects. They gaze and talk with audience to demand audience' attention and assume the presence of audience which invites audience to be involved in imaginary relations. And gestures or facial expressions are often used to amplify demand act.

On the contrary, the offer act is featured without direct visual contact. The represented symbols can be any creatures or objects and audience is just bystanders or passers-by to see what is happening.

In simple words, demand act refers to that represented symbols demand attention from audience while offer act means the represented symbols offer information to audience.

3.2. Social Distance

Social distance can reveal the level of affinity between participants. Like in daily life, shorter distance usually means closer relation. And in visual discourses, the choices of close-up shot, medium shot and long shot suggest the interpersonal relations from intimacy to separation.

Close-up shot, focusing on heads and shoulders or participants' bodies above waists, suggests intimate or personal relation. Medium shot, showing the whole bodies of participants, signifies social distance when people conduct business or other interactive activities. Long shot, exhibiting the whole bodies and background, identifies the distance between strangers.

3.3. Perspective

Perspective, related to the angle, can be mainly split into horizontal angle and vertical angle. And horizontal angle covers frontal angle and oblique angle. When the represented symbols face to audience directly, a front angle is constructed and it seems that audience are involved in the same situation with the represented symbols. On the contrary, oblique angle signifies separation.

As for vertical angle, it covers high angle, eye-level angle, and low angle. They can imply the power relations. With a high angle, audience needs to look down to see the represented symbols, which implies the represented symbols don't have more power than the audience. An eye-level angle suggests equality. And a low angle forces the audience to look up to see the represented symbols which signifies they are more powerful than the audience.

3.4. Modality

Modality, the degrees of credibility, contains high, medium, and low modality. Because the producers of visual discourses can control and change the atmosphere or objects to tell us stories, real or imaginary. High modality means involvement while low modality means detachment. And this thesis will apply color, contextualization, and representation to extend an analysis.

Color covers color saturation, color differentiation and color modulation to unveil natural modality. Color saturation converges on the brightness of colors. Color differentiation focuses on the diversity of colors. And color modulation means the variation of a certain color. In most situations, the higher the three scales are, the more natural modality will be. But when these scales reach in peaks, the natural modality will decrease because of overly full and vivid colors.

Contextualization is about how detailed the background is shown. In normal situations, background is always less detailed than the represented symbols. So, modality increases when the background becomes less detailed to some extent.

Representation is concerned with whether the represented symbols are detailed. And modality increases following a higher representation to some extent. Similarly, when the scale of representation reaches in a peak, the modality will decrease due to too many details.

4. Data Analysis

The author drew on the Elan 6.3 to mark and count the proportion of the concrete presentation strategy. According to visual grammar, contact consists of demand act and offer act. And all the gaze parts of the performer are counted as

demand act while other parts are all offer act. As for social distance, it can be divided into close-up shot, medium shot, and long shot. Among them, what focus on participants' bodies above waists are counted as close-up shots, while medium shots show the whole bodies of participants, and long shots exhibit the whole bodies and background. Finally, perspective can be mainly split into horizontal angle and vertical angle. And horizontal angle covers frontal angle and oblique angle. When the represented symbols face to audience directly, a front angle is constructed. On the contrary, oblique angle signifies separation. As for vertical angle, it covers high angle, eye-level angle, and low angle. With a high angle, audience needs to look down to see the represented symbols. An eye-level angle suggests equality. And a low angle forces the audience to look up to see the represented symbols.

Therefore, the results of Elan 6.3 are shown as Table 2.

As we mentioned in section 3.1, demand act means the direct gaze. The former 2 videos, are always gazing the audience to simulate the situation in that the performer is putting contact lenses in the audience's eyes in order to get them involved the imaginary situation as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. In the last video, however, gaze is seldom or even never employed in order to create a relaxing atmosphereas shown in Figure 3.

As for social distance and perspective, all the performers are sitting on a chair without walking, and the audience can only see the upper part of their body frontally as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, which seems that the audience is involved in the same situation and suggests an intimate relation between the performer and audience. Besides, the eye-level angle makes up 100% in these videos to show an equal status between the performer and audience and shorten the distance between them.

As for modality, these videos all happened in a dim light without colorful items which set a kind of relaxing atmosphere. And the situations are all less-detailed, though the video 2 seems colorful comparatively, the performer tells audience to forget about her room and pay most attention to herself which shows her control of representation modality. Similarly, the other 2 videos all show the representation of performers with clear and detailed presentation, while the contexts are on the contrary. In short, these 3 videos all shine the light

Table 2. Proportions in 3 videos.

| No. | Contact | | Social distance | | | Perspective | | | | |
| | | | | | | Horizontal perspective | | Vertical perspective | | |
	Offer act	Demand act	Close-up shot	Medium shot	Long shot	Frontal angle	Oblique angle	High angle	Eye-level angle	Low angle
1	0.76%	99.34%	100%	0	0	100%	0	0	100%	0
2	12.63%	87.37%	100%	0	0	100%	0	0	100%	0
3	92.40%	7.60%	100%	0	0	100%	0	0	100%	0

Figure 1. Gaze and close-up shot in video 1.

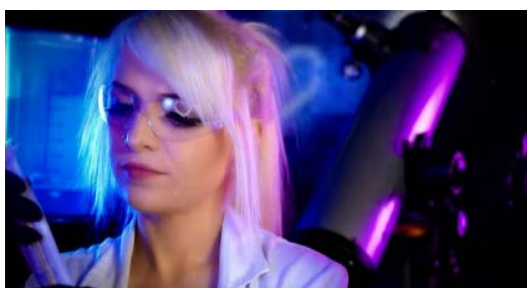
Figure 2. Gaze and close-up shot in video 2.

Figure 3. Close-up shot and eye-level angle in video 3.

on the performers rather than the situations which shorten the distance and attract audience to get involved in the talks with friendly performers.

5. Conclusions

As an innovative genre which highlights the sensual experience of the audience, ASMR videos deserve attention of sociolinguistics.

In view of limited time and space, this study makes a general visual analysis of digital intimacy in ASMR videos, and finds that visual grammar can be also propitious to the construction of digital intimacy in ASMR videos because the rules conform to the meaning construction of ASMR videos.

This study also finds that all the selected videos are found to index intimate digital intimacy. The eye-level and frontal angles are continually employed to give audience a sense of involvement. And the representation and contextualization are all under control.

In view of limited time and space, this study only shines the light on the visual

mode. And ASMR videos also express their meaning through other modes such as music and gestures. For comprehensiveness, researchers in future can involve more modes in studies. Besides, with the assistance of related software, future researches can analyze more cases and give more detailed analysis to make more objective studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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