

Lieve Doucé

Hasselt University
Department of Marketing and
Strategy
3590 Diepenbeek
Belgium

✉ lieve.douce@uhasselt.be

The Effect of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) Ads on Consumer Reactions

ASMR is an abbreviation of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and refers to “a feeling of well-being combined with a tingling sensation in the scalp and down the back of the neck, as experienced by some people in response to a specific gentle stimulus, often a particular sound” (Barratt & Davies, 2015). Recently, a growing number of brands (e.g., The Coca-Cola Company, McDonald’s, Ikea, Coach, and Chanel) have experimented with ASMR-evoking ads, combining visual, tactile, and audio stimuli like whispering, tapping, chewing, and crinkling. This trend is driven by the growing popularity of ASMR videos on social media (e.g., millions of YouTube videos of people whispering, tapping and scratching surfaces, crinkling paper, and making a range of sounds with their mouths for example when eating or drinking products). Despite this increasing popularity, limited research has examined the effects and boundaries of ASMR ads (Lee & Jung, 2019; Sands et al., 2022). One exception is the study of Sands et al. (2022) which indicated that ASMR ads improve brand and product category recall via tingle intensity, immersion, and narrative transportation. However, the ads used were audio-visual ads, and it is not clear whether or not the same effect will be found when adding ASMR cues to other formats with only audio cues such as radio ads or podcasts. Additionally, ASMR ads did not improve recall directly for all examined product categories (i.e., no positive direct effect for the motor vehicle brand Ford). The aim of the current research is to study the effect of ASMR ads on mental imagery, attitudes towards the ad and the brand, and purchase intention, taking into account the moderating role of the type of sensory stimuli used in the advertisement (Study 1) and the endorsed product category (Study 2). In the first experimental study, 320 participants were randomly exposed to one of four Coca-Cola ads which differed in ASMR triggers (non-ASMR ad vs. ASMR ad) and sensory cues (audio-visual vs. audio only). Afterwards, they completed a questionnaire measuring consumer responses towards the ad and the brand, control variables (i.e., thirst, mood, prior exposure to the ad), and demographics. Contrary to previous research (Sands et al., 2022), our results showed that for both audio-visual and only-audio ads, the non-ASMR ad generates more positive consumer reactions (i.e., more, more positive, and more vivid mental images; more positive attitudes towards the ad and the brand; and a higher purchase intention) than the advertisement designed to trigger ASMR. In the second experiment, a 2 (ASMR ad vs. non-ASMR ad) x 2 (product category: food [McDonald’s] vs. handbags [Coach]) between-subjects design was applied. 240 participants were randomly assigned to one of four ads and asked to fill in a similar series of questions as in Study 1. Results showed that product category moderates the effect of ASMR ads on consumer reactions. In line with Study 1 but in contrast with previous research discussing and testing extraordinary sonic experiences related to food and beverages (Sands et al., 2022, Spence, 2020), a positive effect of ASMR ads (vs. non-ASMR ads) on the amount of mental images, attitudes towards the ad and the brand, and purchase intention was only found for the brand of handbags, and not for the food brand. To conclude, the results of this research indicate that ASMR ads can affect consumer reactions positively, yet not for all product categories. Further research needs to investigate the reason why ASMR works better for some product categories. Does it depend on the product category or can these differences rather be explained by brand features like positioning and brand image?