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## A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ASEXUAL REPRESENTATION AND VISIBILITY ON REDDIT

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## Abstract

Asexuality remains an under-researched topic in media, gender & sexualities studies. Previous research has explored definitional questions of asexuality, interviews and surveys of asexual people, and consideration of asexuality's place within queer and feminist communities. However, research has not yet fully explored the issue of asexuality invisibility in the media, which currently amounts to symbolic annihilation. While representation of asexuality is nearly non-existent in mainstream and traditional media, digital spaces have been the location of visibility and self-expression for asexuals. In examining how queer representation of asexuality is seen and made visible online, this textual analysis study examined the content created by ten asexuality-focused subdivisions ("subreddits") of the social media site Reddit. This study found that asexual subreddits serve as areas of community, pride, and discussion on the concept of asexuality for asexual individuals, while they serve as resources and locations of support for those in the early stages of questioning or understanding their own asexuality. These efforts fight symbolic annihilation of asexuality to these groups of people, though whether these sites combat larger invisibilities is unclear

A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ASEXUAL REPRESENTATION AND VISIBILITY  
ON REDDIT

by

Kyle Webster

B.S., University of Oregon, 2018

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Media Studies

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Asexuality has been a recent topic of interest within human sexuality and queer research. Many who have approached the topic have attempted to conceptualize asexuality – an orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction – and place it within modern understandings of sexuality (e.g. Dawson, McDonnell, & Scott, 2016; Gupta, 2018; Mollet & Lackman, 2018; Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter, 2017; Vares, 2018). However, one element of asexuality that remains understudied is its cultural invisibility. Representations of asexuality and of asexual people are nearly nonexistent in the current news and entertainment media landscape, contributing to a lack of public awareness of asexual identity. Some have noted that this invisibility has become core to the modern definition of asexuality identity, and that asexuality itself is “The Invisible Orientation” (Decker, 2014). One area of asexual representation that is worthy of study is the way in which asexual people or advocates create spaces of visibility for asexuality within this culture of limited representation. This study aims to conduct this examination by turning to online posts on Reddit web forums dedicated to asexuality.

Studies focused on asexuality have not yet broached the topic of asexual media or representation. Much of the research up to this point has remained at the foundational question of how asexuality is defined. Many studies in this vein were conducted in response to both the arrival of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) advocacy group created in 2001, and a 2004 study estimating that 1% of the general population identifies as asexual (About AVEN; Bogaert, 2004). In that 2004 study, asexuality was contrasted against hypoactive sexual desire disorder and related medical conditions and defined as “the *absence* of a traditional sexual orientation, in which an individual would exhibit little or no sexual attraction to males or females” (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279). Subsequently, many different studies took up the task of

elaborating on or complicating that definition. Some of these studies consisted of research surveying and interviewing self-identified asexuals about their sexual desires and behaviors. Typically, these studies found that asexuality is best understood as either a lack of sexual desire or a lack of sexual attraction, with the caveat that the actual sexual activity of self-identified asexual people is varied (Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, Erskine, 2008).

Additionally, studies that have approached the definition of asexuality from a theoretical perspective have considered three ways of defining asexuality – asexuality defined as a lack of sexual attraction, asexuality defined as a lack of sexual desire, and asexuality defined by self-identification as “asexual.” In this context, lack of sexual attraction refers to an absence of attraction to or lust for others, lack of sexual desire refers to a disinterest in engaging in sexual activity, and definition by self-identification refers to the open-ended definition that considers a person asexual if they call themselves asexual. These studies typically have argued for the use of the lack of attraction definition (Bogaert 2012; Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, & Enzlin, 2013). Moving away from this definitional work, studies have examined asexuality as sexual orientation and have placed it within a queer studies context. The result of these studies is neither that asexuality firmly belongs in the LGBTQ umbrella, nor that all asexuals identify as LGBTQ/queer. (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Other researchers working in a queer context have taken on the task of making space in queerness for asexuality, and in making space in asexuality for queerness. As Przybylo and Cooper (2014) assert in their archival work, “where there is queerness there is also asexuality” (p. 299).

From this queer studies reorientation of asexuality, work has been done to place asexual identity in an intersectional context with other elements of identity. Some of this work has

challenged the agreed-upon definitions of asexuality, including the reliance of researchers on self-identified asexuals (Chasin, 2011). Asexuality has also been studied and theorized alongside gender norms (Gupta, 2018), disability narratives (Kim, 2011), and within the context of feminist studies (Cerankoski & Milks, 2010), each with the intention of accounting for diversity and for intersections of identity. Within the queer studies paradigm, recent studies on asexuality have examined the lives and/or perspectives of asexual people. These include studies focused on asexuals' conceptions and realities of dating, romance, and intimacy (Dawson, McDonnell, & Scott, 2016; Vares, 2017), as well as one recent study broadly aimed at accounting for the lives of asexual people outside of their sexual or romantic relationships (Rothblum, Heimann & Carpenter, 2018). Additionally, asexuality has also contributed to, and is contributed by, queer theory. Two central questions have been raised from the consideration of asexuality in a queer theoretical lens. The first is the question of whether asexuality is queer, and how the presence of asexuality complicates queer sexual politics and activism by de-centralizing sex. The second question is what challenge asexuality provides to a sex-centric culture, and how it cannot exist (and is thus destabilizing) in a culture which assumes that sexuality is universal. These questions are complicated themselves on various fronts, from asexuality researchers who base their work on the assumption of queer asexuality, to gay and lesbian activists who see asexuality as potential way to lose the power of sexual specificity in queer movements, to asexual individuals without clear notions of their place within or relationship to queer identities (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014).

Asexual representation within media is currently a gap in queer studies, though it is a gap that is articulated in the research in many ways. In research that includes the voices of asexual people, as well as research by asexual people, the absence of media representation and role



models is explicitly addressed. In the Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter (2018) study examining the lives of asexual people, they note that “although this was not part of the structured interview, a few participants mentioned the complete lack of asexual characters in the media” (p. 91).

Media depictions of asexuality – both instances of positive representation and instances where asexuality is erased in media – were cited in this study as important moments to some asexual individuals in learning about asexuality for the first time and in coming to terms with their own sexuality. One participant is described as having a “hunger” for representation, and states that “it can feel incredibly isolating when you’re watching any sort of mainstream media because you don’t exist within it” (p. 91). While this is an absence in the media landscape at large, there is also an absence in research which conceptualizes asexual representation or tracks the representation that already exists. Some of this work has been taken up by advocacy groups, including the GLAAD organization, which has recently tracked asexual representation on television in its annual *Where We Are on TV* and *Studio Responsibility Index* reports (GLAAD, 2018; GLAAD, 2019). Representation of asexuality on television has also been a topic of interest in media press, with news outlets such as *Vox* and *Esquire* publishing pieces examining asexuality on television in the wake of asexual characters appearing on shows such as *BoJack Horseman* (Corcione, 2016; Ghaleb, 2018).

As seen in these examples, the “media gap” in asexual studies has been articulated very plainly by researchers, asexual research participants, and by advocates outside of academia. This articulation speaks to the significance of asexual media, as asexual people are speaking clearly to their desire for representation. This dearth of representation seen in the news and entertainment media contributes to the symbolic annihilation of asexuality and cements its status as the “invisible orientation.” These conditions suggest that the current status of asexuality

representation in the media amounts to symbolic annihilation. Originated by Gerbner (1972) and expanded upon by in Tuchman's (1978) analysis of the marginalization and erasure of working women in mainstream media, symbolic annihilation is an important concept in this case which can be used to identify how identities are made invisible in the media. Per Tuchman's expansion of the concept, symbolic annihilation occurs when a group of people are largely absent in the mainstream media, and when the few representations of the group which are present are trivializing or offer condemnation. Tuchman's analysis provides insight on the effects of symbolic annihilation, suggesting that the impact of this media absence and marginalization is significant. Those in a group that is symbolically annihilated (in Tuchman's example, women and young girls) fail to see themselves in mediated representations of their world, and in some cases instead identify with the limited and misrepresented representations that they do see. We can see similar effects and responses to media in the responses of asexual research participants noted above – that the lack of representation resulted in a feeling of isolation from the world (Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter, 2018).

Within this context, one unanswered question is how asexuality is seen in digital spaces, and how digital spaces dedicated to asexuality are being utilized as locations of self-expression and representation for asexual people. To achieve these aims, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the representation of sexual identity for asexual people on Reddit internet forums dedicated to asexuality. At this stage in the research the representation of sexual identity will be defined as how sexual identity is expressed, depicted, and negotiated through social media. In the second chapter of this study, relevant literature on the concept of asexuality, on the current state of asexual representation, and on research surrounding Reddit will be reviewed and discussed. In the third chapter, a textual analysis methodology for this study, derived from and

influenced by similar studies into online representation and self-expression, is outlined. In the fourth chapter, the results of this study are detailed in the form of seven common themes found in the posts of these subreddits, including *Questioning*, *Coming Out*, *Dating/Having Sex*, *Pride/Community*, *Venting*, *Culture/Representation*, and *Conceptual Links*. In the fifth chapter, these results and themes are connected back to existing asexual literature and the theoretical lens of queer theory and symbolic annihilation to address the research questions brought forward in this study. Limitations and areas for future research are also detailed in the fifth chapter.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, the relevant literature on asexuality, the application of queer studies and queer theory to the concept of asexuality, and the current status of asexuality representation will be reviewed. Additionally, the research site of the Reddit website and its relevant “subreddit” subdivisions will be explored. Previous research on the website, especially research related to LGBTQ+ identity, representation, and expression, will be reviewed. Guided by the previously existing literature, this chapter presents four research questions to be answered by this study.

### *Asexuality*

The concept of asexuality as established in the research is relatively new, with work focused explicitly on asexuality as a sexual orientation being largely absent from 20th century research. However, two research trends in the previous century did outline the conceptual possibility of asexuality. The first trend is within sexualities research, in which the concept of asexuality was suggested or hinted at but never fully defined or explored. This can be seen most clearly in the attempts by researchers to create scales of sexuality, in which sexualities such as heterosexuality and homosexuality are conceptualized by the presence of attraction to various genders (Storms, 1980). The operationalization of sexuality and sexual orientation in these studies created space for the possibility of asexuality, by theorizing a sexual orientation defined in some capacity not by the presence of attraction but by an absence of attraction. The second trend is within disabilities research, which did not outline or hint at asexuality as a concept or as a sexual orientation but is nevertheless where much of 20th century research on individual lack

of sexual attraction or desire is located. This is especially true of research on sexual disorders such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder (Beck, 1995).

Sexuality scales and sexual disorder research did establish several concepts connected to asexuality in the 20th century, but neither of these trends in the literature took on asexuality itself as a topic, and neither can be neatly placed into an understanding of modern asexuality studies. This changed in the early 21st century, which saw a significant shift in asexuality research. A significant part of this shift was an influential study by Bogaert (2004) on asexuality and associated factors, which outlined a conceptual definition of asexuality (defining asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction) and estimated that 1% of the population was asexual. Bogaert's work is cited in other asexuality research in the years after 2004, which often work to expand on Bogaert's initial conceptualization of asexuality or challenge the definitions he used and his results (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, Erskine, 2008; Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Chasin, 2011; Prause & Graham, 2007). This shift in the research was also predated by a shift in the visibility of asexuality outside of the research – most notably, the creation of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) advocacy group in 2001 (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, n.d.).

Following these early foundational moments, subsequent research that took on asexuality as a subject initially focused on interrogating existing ideas surrounding asexuality and establishing the concept. These studies typically considered three definitions of asexuality: lack of lust or feelings of sexual attraction towards other, lack of desire to engage in sexual acts, and an inclusive definition characterized by self-identification with the asexual label. This work is key in establishing a concept of asexuality, as creating a working definition of asexuality centered around a lack of sexuality activity assumes that individuals who show a lack of sexual

attraction or sexual desire therefore do not have sex. As Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine (2008) show, this is not the case, as a significant portion of self-identified asexuals who report a lack of sexual attraction have also engaged in various types of sexual activity. Studies in this vein have suggested that various elements of sexuality, such as arousability and excitement, are seen in lower levels for asexual individuals, while still arguing that a conceptualization for asexuality needs to make room for individuals with a wide range of sexual activities (Prause & Graham, 2007).

Other research involves considerations of the place of asexuality in certain theories of gender and sexuality. Some of this work places asexuality in the context of feminist and queer theory, arguing that the way in which asexuality fits within feminist and queer spaces (and whether asexuality is itself inherently feminist or queer) is an open question, but there is no question that feminist and queer studies benefit from considerations of asexuality, and that asexuality similarly benefits from being considered in feminist and queer contexts (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010). Research in this vein also highlights varieties within the concept of asexuality, including considerations of the fluidity of asexuality and how differences in asexual individuals could constitute a series of related orientations as oppose to one catch-all “asexual” orientation. The label of “asexual” is also highlighted as a possible risk of asexual studies, as surveys which depend on self-identified asexual individuals may exclude those who could be considered asexual under other definitions, but do not identify with the label for a specific reason (e.g. they do not know about asexuality, they feel romantic attraction, they engage in sexual activity, they sometimes feel sexual attraction in certain circumstances, etc.) (Chasin, 2011). In terms of establishing a definition of asexuality, these studies advocate for a definition of asexuality as lack of sexual attraction. In doing so, they also reject centering asexuality around lack of sexual

desire or self-identification. Using a definition centered around a lack of sexual desire excludes asexuals who engage in various forms of sexual activity, while using self-identification in research risks missing “potential asexual” individuals. Additionally, in previous sexualities research sexual attraction is the central dimension typically used for definitions of sexual orientation (Bogart, 2012; Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, & Enzlin, 2013). This is mostly in agreement with how asexuality is defined outside of the literature and within advocacy groups, though these groups do more work to expand the scope of asexuality to include related sexual and romantic orientations. These include: aromanticism, which refers to a lack of romantic attraction as opposed to a lack of sexual attraction; grey-asexuality, which describes individuals who consider themselves asexual but experience sexual attraction some of the time or under specific circumstances; and demisexuality, which describes individuals who experience sexual attraction but only to people with whom they’ve developed a strong romantic or emotional bond. Within advocacy groups, this collection of related sexual and romantic orientations including asexuality are often referred to as the “asexual umbrella” (Arbuckle, 2014).

### *Queer Theory and Asexuality*

Following studies which worked to define asexuality as a concept and as a sexual orientation, some researchers began placing asexuality in a queer context. These studies marked a shift away from research tracing the characteristics of asexuality, and towards a focus on asexuality as a sexual orientation and as a marker of identity (Gressgård, 2013). This shift is most notably signified by the crossing over of asexuality and queer theory. The foundation of queer theory, the project of foundational writers such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, involves the complication of restrictive norms and histories of sexualities and

genders. The work of queer theorists has challenged rigid definitions of gender and sexuality, beginning with the argument against understandings of gender as a “male or female” dichotomy and of sexuality as a “heterosexual or homosexual” dichotomy. This involves deconstructing the ways in which these restrictive understandings are culturally created and reinforced, and the development of queer readings to uncover various types of queerness in cultural texts which may otherwise remain unexamined. In this context, asexuality is a sexual orientation that exists outside of the “heterosexual/homosexual” dichotomy that queer theory works to disrupt, and using a queer theoretical lens can assist in understanding the places of asexuality in a larger set of sexualities and how asexuality has been marginalized and made invisible (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010).

Core to the combination of queer theory and asexuality is the question: Is asexuality queer? Many of these early works made efforts to affirm and assert the queerness of asexuality as a core tenet of asexuality research. In their review of asexual research, Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka (2017) find that the research points to asexuality as a sexual orientation, as opposed to a result of a medical condition or dysfunction, while arguing for more research which addresses asexual identity and asexual communities. Other similar calls are more assertive in their insistence that asexuality be seen as queer and that queerness be found in asexuality. This includes archival work that aims to locate asexuality within the history of queer identities (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014). Other studies have complicated the notion of queer asexuality from a number of angles. One survey of asexual college students found that, while 87% believed that asexuality should be considered as queer/LGBTQ, only 62% considered themselves as part of the LGBTQ community on the basis of their own asexual identity (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). This implies a complexity and diversity in how asexuals consider their own identity in contrast to asexual identity as a



concept. In looking at the politics of asexuality, many studies have identified asexuality as a counter to sex-driven and sex-focused popular cultures, suggesting a political radicality inherent to asexuality. However, research has also suggested that ascribing a radical politics to asexuality or presenting asexual people as subversive or radical does not do justice to the political and cultural diversity of asexuality people (Dawson, Scott & McDonnell, 2018).

From the intersection of asexuality and queerness, much of the research on asexuality has questioned how other elements of identity come into play and intersect with asexual identity. Work on asexuality in this context has included studies on how asexual people navigate aspects of life typically associated with sex and sexuality including intimacy and dating. In a study involving research diary entries of asexual people, Dawson, McDonnell & Scott (2016) found that asexual individuals find ways to navigate within societal and sexual boundaries, consider their own boundaries of intimacy as closely connected to their asexual identity, and that, counter to the idea of asexuality as a radical subversion of sexual society, the practices of intimacy used by asexual people are not uniquely asexual and are shared by individuals of other sexualities.

Another study by Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter (2018) attempted specifically to look at aspects of asexual lives not related to romantic relationships and found that the lack of general knowledge about asexuality in culture has a lived effect on their lives. This was seen in how they communicate with others and interact with social expectations of sexuality, and in how they lack representation and role models in the media. The last point about representation is noteworthy in the Rothblum, Heimann & Carpenter study, as media was not one of the topics the researchers asked their asexual participants about as a part of the study but was independently mentioned by participants so frequently that it was included in the results. Research has also been done on the intersection of asexuality and disabilities, picking up on the initial correlation between these two

concepts which can be seen in the origins of asexuality research (Kim, 2011). While this correlation is potentially problematic from many directions – as it can imply that asexuality is a disability, that disabled people cannot be sexual, and correcting these implications could erase those who are both asexual and disabled – both are common in their attempts to challenge notions of compulsory sexuality and regulate what types of bodies are seen as sexually viable. Another intersection that has been investigated is between gender norms and asexuality. Asexuality conflicts with gender norms in varied ways. For example, men are seen as more sexually aggressive and ambitious, meaning that asexual men have to come up against these notions of masculinity. However, this is offset by the greater sexual autonomy granted to men, especially as contrasted with the lack of sexual autonomy often granted to women (Gupta, 2018).

While this central question of asexuality's queerness remains a central point in considerations of asexuality and queer theory, some have declared asexuality as queer and attempted to chart out future possibilities for analyses of asexuality through a queer theorist lens. This approach is best characterized by asexuality researchers Cerankowski & Milks (2014) in their description of asexuality studies: "Making sense of the social marginalization and pathologization of bodies based on the preference to not have sex, along with exploring new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures – how could that not be queer?" (p. 3). From this declaration of the queerness of asexuality, Cerankowski & Milks elaborate on this contribution of asexuality to queer theory. Where queer theory at large challenges notions of heteronormativity, asexuality challenges a broader cultural assumption of universal sexuality. Where asexuality studies from adopting a queer theoretical lens is in the use of this framework to challenge the centrality of sexuality in culture at large, and in queer conceptions of non-normative sexualities and orientations in specific. However, while this challenge provides a

useful lens through which to analyze cultural symbols and representations of asexuality, as noted above, ascribing a queer or radical politics to asexuality potentially runs counter to asexual individuals who do not see themselves as queer or radical (Dawson, Scott & McDonnell, 2018; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). This suggests that the central question of asexuality's relationship to queerness is still relevant, especially in studies that involve asexual individuals and their perspectives on asexuality. To account for this, the use of queer theory as a theoretical lens in this study will use the conceptualization of asexuality as queer and account for the potential for asexual representations as a challenge to assumed universal sexuality, and while also accounting for ways in which the question of "is asexuality queer?" is seen in these social media posts of asexual individuals.

### *Symbolic Annihilation and Asexual Representation*

As a queer orientation, one distinctive quality of asexuality is its cultural invisibility (Decker, 2014). Research has suggested that this invisibility could be the result of the centrality of sex and sexuality to Western culture and society. These studies have also addressed the potential for asexuality to disrupt ideas of compulsory sexuality, the extent to which asexuality can be seen as a disruption of sexual society, and the negative effects of this marginalization on asexual individuals (Pryzbylo, 2011; Gupta, 2017). A large element of this invisibility can also be attributed to the absence of asexual representation in popular media. In their most recent report on LGBTQ characters on broadcast, cable, and streaming television, GLAAD found that of the 75 LGBTQ regular and recurring characters on primetime scripted television in the 2018-2019 television season, only two were asexual. GLAAD also notes that the first-time inclusion of

an asexual character had only happened one year prior, during the 2017-2018 television season (GLAAD, 2018). GLAAD's most recent reporting on films shows that there are no asexual characters in major studio films, while also warning readers that the upcoming adaptation of the novel *Doctor Sleep* may include a harmful storyline from the source material where a character's asexuality is delegitimized and depicted as a result of sexual trauma (GLAAD, 2019). An absence of asexuality can also be seen in news media. A LexisNexis search of English-language news articles between October 1, 2018 and October 1, 2019 with the word "asexual" or "asexuality" in the title resulted in only 77 articles in total, many of which were not related to the sexual orientation of asexuality, but rather to the biological process of asexual cell division.

The current status of asexual representation and absence in culture amounts to symbolic annihilation as conceptualized by Gerbner (1972) and expanded on by Tuchman (1978). This is significant because mediated absences of marginalized groups results in audiences, who either fail to see this identity in the media or are only able to access disparaging and/or negative representations, coming to accept (or, if audience members are in this group, identify with) these absences and misrepresentations. Research on the psychological effects of symbolic annihilation has shown that these mediated absences affect processes of self-conceptualization and group-identification, changing how viewers see themselves and their identity in relation to what has an annihilating presence on-screen. This results in negative moods, negative self-concepts, and feelings of social exclusion on the part of the viewer (Corsbie-Massay, C. L. & Read, S. J., 2014). Additionally, effects research has pointed to intersectionality as a key concept in understanding the psychology of symbolic annihilation. Media absence can activate multiple, and perhaps conflicting, elements of an individual's identity. When identity conflict does activate

multiple aspects of identity, the negative effects of symbolic annihilation are more likely to occur (Baumeister, 1986; Crenshaw, 1993).

Symbolic annihilation has been applied to queer theory, with research examining both how mainstream media do not represent queer identities and renders them invisible, and how moments of intervention by queer audiences create representation to combat this invisibility. Examples of work detailing this intervention have included a Caswell, Migoni, Geraci & Cifor (2016) interview study of community archivists aiming to collect artifacts of various marginalized communities to combat absences in mainstream media and archives, and an analysis by Venzo (2016) of queer fan fictions as creative interventions that provide queer Star Trek fans with LGBTQ+ representation in the textual universe of the series that is not otherwise present in the franchise. Even within these contexts, asexuality is a gap in the research concerning symbolic annihilation and queer theory.

Despite the general lack of asexual representation in media, some research has attempted to seek out and analyze representations of asexuality in media and culture. The majority of this research has not analyzed self-identified asexual people, but instead has looked at various examples in fiction, popular culture, or historical accounts of figures which have shown a lack of sexual attraction or other characteristics of asexuality. An analysis by Osterwald (2017) of asexual representation in media compared and contrasted medieval, renaissance, and modern characters who exhibit signifiers of asexuality. These include Guigemar of *Lai of Guigemar*, Marcela of *Don Quixote*, Sherlock Holmes of the BBC adaptation *Sherlock*, the Eleventh Doctor of *Doctor Who*, and Voodoo of *Sirens*. Common among these depictions is how a lack of sexual attraction is either dismissed or explained away (Marcela's lack of sexual interest is depicted as a way for her to manipulate men's sexual desires), seen as a problem for others to fix (Guigemar's

lack of attraction is seen as a struggle and ends when he meets a young queen) or backgrounded in favor of odd personality quirks of the characters (such as Sherlock Holmes' intelligence or Voodoo's obsession with disturbing gruesomeness). Other studies on asexuality in media take a broader approach, such as an analysis of the films of Alfred Hitchcock that observes a trend of asexuality in the female characters in *Marnie*, *Rope*, and *Psycho*, which are used by Hitchcock to comment on and condemn sexual-driven culture while also reinforcing the idea that all humans, and especially non-heterosexual humans, are driven by sexuality (Burdock, 2018). Some studies of asexuality in media have also included analyses of the public personas of actual individuals. These include an analysis by Cerankowski (2013) of how the "dandyism" of celebrity stylist Tim Gunn's own personal style plays into his image as a man uninterested in sex. Also included is a broader analysis of asexuality in media by Wrhel (2017) which considers Mark Twain's (very limited) writing on sex and his public persona through an asexual lens.

Outside of the research, the recent presence of asexual characters on American television shows such as *BoJack Horseman* and *Shadowhunters* has inspired some analysis in the popular and entertainment press. These characters have differed from previous depictions of asexuality in that the characters are prominent in the shows they appear in, and their asexuality is made explicit and is integrated into the storylines surrounding their characters. Articles in entertainment press have pointed to television representations such as these as positive examples of representation and have also suggested that they may contribute to an increase in cultural visibility for asexuality (Corcione, 2016; Ghaleb, 2018).

One area which has been understudied is asexual representation in online and social media spaces. As Fox & Ralston (2016) found in their interview research on queer identity and internet information seeking, online sources were the primary way by which asexual individuals

become aware of asexuality. As they write, “Online role models were most essential for individuals with identities that are rarely portrayed or invisible in regular media, such as asexuals or individuals going through gender transitions” (Fox & Ralston, 2016, p. 641). Participants in Fox & Ralston’s research also indicated that social media and internet sources in turn are the primary ways by which those same individuals attempt to spread awareness and increase the cultural visibility of asexuality. This research points to social media sites, such as asexuality-focused Reddit sites, as valuable for asexual people seeking information and asexual communities fighting invisibility. As such, the information about asexuality which is conveyed through these sites is likely to be especially influential.

### *Online Performance of Sexuality*

In addition to work on the role of the internet in the spreading of knowledge and awareness about asexuality, previous research on the discourse and performance of sexuality online is also relevant to the study at hand. Much of this work uses the concept of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler (1990) as a lens for analyzing the ways in which gender and sexuality are performed online. The concept of performativity refers to the creation of a social construction of gender and sexuality through repeated acts and performances of certain behaviors. This concept is provided in contrast to an essentialist view of gender and sexuality, which see those aspects of identity as inherent and fixed parts of a person’s being. Butler’s concept of performativity complicates this notion, suggesting that identity categories are created by cultural forces and social institutions which enforce gender binaries and heteronormativity, not the other way around. Thus, performativity is useful in analyzing the influence of media representations of genders and sexualities outside of their respective

normative binaries. Research into asexuality therefore benefits from a consideration of performativity, and interrogations into how asexuality “should be considered a *product* of our cultural here/now, even as it contains *transgressive* possibilities” (Przybylo, 2011). In this context of this study, utilizing this concept involves observing how social media posts made on subreddits dedicated to asexuality can be seen as “performances” of asexuality, and analyzing how these performances contribute to the cultural understanding and definition of asexuality.

Previous research that approaches how gender and sexuality is performed through the internet and digital technologies is also relevant here. Performativity has been applied to digital spaces to analyze the ways in which internet users create virtual and online identities, perform gender and sexuality, and transgress norms in digital interaction and communication (van Doorn, 2010; Cover, 2012). Other research has focused on the interplay between the digital and the physical in the performance of gender, arguing that this interplay results in virtual image of gender that becomes embodied in the structure and memory of digital spaces and networks. This research suggests that online environments and communities could be fruitful areas to observe this interplay, as individuals involved in such communities perform gender in ways that both move past physical and material boundaries while also paradoxically materializing those boundaries into digital systems (van Doorn, 2011; Proulx, 2016). While some of the previous research on the construction of digital and online identities has addressed the utilization of these technologies by queer individuals in the creation of queer digital identities, little attention has been given to asexuality in this context. To contribute to this body of research, the analysis of asexuality-focused subreddit websites in the proposed study will address how the posts on these sites play into the creation of asexual digital identities, what collection of behaviors both offline



and online makes an “asexual performance” and in what ways sexuality norms are both transgressed and reinforced in the conceptualization of asexuality in these digital spaces.

### *Reddit as a site of research*

Reddit is a social media website where users can post text, images, links to other websites, and other forms of content. The site is subdivided into “subreddits” which typically are centered on a particular interest, such as “/r/worldnews”, “/r/science” and “/r/gaming”. Core to much of this research is the observation that many of the popular subreddits center around “geek” interests and cater to a user assumed to be white, straight, and male (Massanari, 2015). However, one distinguishing factor of Reddit is its ability to foster subcommunities through its various subreddits, and many of these subreddits center on non-hegemonic identities, serving as digital communities and locations of information while also offering users a chance to perform gender (Darwin, 2017). Some research has been done on specific communities within Reddit which directly challenge the assumption of the privileged Reddit user, such as Massanari’s (2017) analysis of a feminist humor and trolling subreddit. How sexualities and sexual orientations are performed on Reddit has also been a subject of interest in the field of pornography studies, which has created some procedures for visual analysis on the website (van der Negal, 2013; Robards, 2017).

Qualitative research on Reddit is typically conducted from either an ethnographic perspective or a textual or thematic content analysis perspective. Researchers who utilize a virtual ethnography method typically conceptualize the website as a community, involve the researcher becoming “immersed” in the community to some degree, and attempt to account for the participation of users and the discussion and interaction between users (Darwin, 2017;

Robards, 2017). These studies also take care to analyze Reddit's design and interface and examine how those elements of the website influence participation (van der Nagel, 2013; Massanari, 2015). Researchers who utilize a textual or thematic content analysis method instead approach these communities as producers/consumers of media content and makers of meaning, with both the user posts and the subsequent discussion that emerges being treated and coded as text (Massanari, 2017). These methods are not exclusive, and most researchers utilize practices from each method.

### *For This Research*

Asexuality is largely invisible in media, and representation is almost entirely non-existent in mainstream sources, amounting to symbolic annihilation and the marginalization of a queer identity. In digital spaces, however, possibilities exist for communities centered on asexuality. This research analyzed how user posts in asexuality-focused sections of the social media site Reddit work to represent asexuality in a media environment, and what they contribute to both asexual visibility and understandings of the concept of asexuality.

The four research questions for this analysis are:

RQ1: How is asexual identity represented in social media user posts on subreddits focused on asexuality?

RQ2: How is asexuality conceptualized in these posts?

RQ3: How do these posts serve to combat a cultural assumption of universal sexuality or otherwise contribute to a queer definition or understanding of asexuality?

RQ4: How do these posts serve to combat the symbolic annihilation (i.e. the absence, trivialization, and/or condemnation) of asexuality?

*Summary*

In this chapter, existing literature on asexuality was discussed and outlined. This information is useful and relevant to the study at hand as it outlines current understandings of asexuality and tracks how the conceptualization of asexuality has evolved over the years. Asexuality has been a subject of academic research. The literature currently points to asexuality as a queer sexual orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction, though elements of this understanding are also contested by some sources. Several gaps in asexual research were also highlighted in the existing literature, including the absence of media representation and analysis of asexuality which this study aims to address. The online research site of Reddit.com was also outlined, as was the role of online performativity on understandings of sexuality in digital spaces. This research was used to guide the current study and four research questions relating to the representation, conceptualization, visibility, and efforts to combat symbolic annihilation of asexuality on subreddit websites centered around the topic of asexuality.

## Chapter Three: Research Design

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, a textual analysis methodology and two theoretical lenses – symbolic annihilation and queer theory – utilized for answering the research questions presented in this study will be outlined. The relevant asexuality-focused subdivisions of the research site Reddit will also be identified, and procedures on the sampling, data collection, and coding processes for content on these “subreddit” sites will be detailed. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of the researcher’s role and how its potential influence on this study was considered.

### *Textual Analysis*

To answer the research questions proposed in the previous chapter, posts from ten asexuality-focused subreddit forums were analyzed primarily using textual analysis, with some secondary elements of ethnographic methodology. As the emphasis of this study is representation and how social media defines and makes asexuality (in)visible, the primary focus is on how asexuality-focused subreddits create meaning out of asexuality. These are questions that are well-suited to textual analysis methodology focused on the content of the user posts, as opposed to an ethnographic methodology focused on the setup of the community and the relationships between the users.

Two theoretical lenses guided this textual analysis. The first is symbolic annihilation, which informed how the first and second research questions about representation and visibility respectively were addressed. Previous research has suggested that the lack of representation of queer people, especially in the mainstream, amounts to symbolic annihilation and has caused queer audience to seek out and create their own avenues of representation (Gross, 1991).

Because the sites of research selected for this study are places where asexuality is represented and is made visible, a central focus in this textual analysis was how the content serves as an attempt to correct symbolic annihilation. The second theoretical lens is queer theory. This is especially relevant to the third proposed research question (“How is asexuality conceptualized in these posts?”) as conceptualizations of asexuality in the literature are often considered in the context of the cultural discussion and enforcement of sexuality as identified by queer theorists. While the placement of asexual identity in the queer community is an ongoing discussion and debate in the literature, the usage of queer theory in asexual studies can inform these questions (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010).

### *Sampling*

A purposive sample was utilized to identify subreddits relating to or centered around asexuality. The subreddits chosen for analysis are: “/r/asexuality”, “/r/Asexual,” “/r/AceTeens,” “/r/AsexualMen”, “r/AcePhilosophy”, “r/AceAndAroArt, “/r/aaaaaaacccccccce”, “/r/Aromantic”, “/r/Demisexuality”, and “r/aromanticasexual”. The initial subreddit chosen was the most active and popular (with 42.3 thousand members) asexuality-focused subreddit “/r/asexuality.” Though this is not a snowball sample as there were no participants in this study, a technique similar to snowball sampling was utilized to identify a network of communities from this initial “/r/asexuality” subreddit. The information in the “community details” section of this subreddit includes a list of subreddits which serve as related communities. From this list, nine additional subreddits were added to the sample. These include six asexuality-focused subreddits: “/r/Asexual”, “/r/AceTeens”, “/r/AsexualMen”, “r/AcePhilosophy”, and “r/AceAndAroArt” which all have titles that describe the specific focus of the subreddit, and “/r/aaaaaaacccccccce”,

a subreddit dedicated to asexual humor. The sample also included three subreddits focused on orientations considered to be in the asexual umbrella: “/r/Aromantic”, “/r/Demisexuality”, and “/r/aromanticasexual”. None of these are as active as the “/r/asexuality” subreddit, with member counts ranging from 14.6 thousand (“/r/aaaaaacccccccce”) to roughly 300 (“/r/AceAndAroArt”). Five subreddits from this list of related communities were not included in this sample: “/r/androgyny” and “/r/agender” were not included because they center around gender expression and identity as opposed to sexual or romantic orientation; “/r/cupiosexual” and “/r/asensual” were not included because they are infrequently used and each have member counts of less than 150; and “/r/r4rasexual” was not included as it uses the Reddit website to functionally serve as a dating website.

The ten subreddits were observed and posts made by users were recorded during three separate three-day periods of time over the course of two months. This was to create a sample that offers a somewhat representative glance at posts on these subreddits, while also allowing for data collection to pick up on threads and conversations which occur over the course of several days. These time periods were January 20 to January 22, 2020; January 30 to February 2, 2020; and February 9 to February 11, 2020. These dates were chosen in an attempt to avoid collecting data on specific holidays or near events which may have influenced the type of post being made on these sites, including Valentine’s Day and the conclusion of a television series (*BoJack Horseman*) with an asexual character. All posts from these time periods that were collected by the Crimson Hexagon software were included in the sample, with one exception: occasionally the Crimson Hexagon software included posts that had been deleted either by the poster or the moderators of the subreddits to which they had been submitted. These deleted posts were excluded from the sample.

### *Data Coding*

For each post, recorded data included the post's title, content (including text, images, and/or web links), username, and time posted. Reddit allows users to add a personal tag next to their username and allows users and moderators to add a descriptive tag next to the title of individual posts; these will be recorded when present. Additionally, the content, username, and time posted of the comments for each post was also recorded. All data was collected using Crimson Hexagon, a social media analytics software which uses AI technology and a large database of social media posts to analyze sentiment and audience perception across the internet for the purposes of brand management and marketing ("Crimson Hexagon," n.d.). For the purpose of this study, the AI and data analysis aspects of Crimson Hexagon were ignored, and instead the software and the was used for its extensive databased to comprehensively collect each post from the ten subreddits.

All data was recorded and coded in Microsoft Excel. Coding consisted of two rounds, following procedures utilized in other qualitative studies on Reddit content (Van der Nagel, 2013; Massanari, 2017; Robards, 2017). During the first round, the titles, content, tags, and comments of each post were descriptively coded (Saldaña, 2016). During the second round, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) occurred, and codes were distilled and categorized as common emergent themes between similar codes were identified.

### *Researcher Role*

The specifics of Reddit as a site of research also played into the considerations that I have made in evaluating my role as researcher. As a young white man, I satisfy many of the

demographic markers of the assumed Reddit user. Therefore, much of the website is designed to cater towards someone like me. This likely protects me from elements of the site that foster racist, homophobic, and misogynist content that would make Reddit hostile to users of various minority groups. In regard to the specific asexual communities I have analyzed, my status as an asexual man is also important to note. Ideally this has enhanced my data analysis, as I can assume a shared lived experience of asexuality with the users who are posting content, but there is also the danger of my experience influencing my analysis in a way that threatens the validity of this study. To avoid this during the data collection and analysis process, I took care to carefully note and critically examine my own experience of reading and coding this content.

|



## Chapter Four: Results

### *Introduction*

This study examined 701 posts from ten subreddit websites centered on asexuality. The most active of these subreddits was r/asexuality with 335 posts collected, while r/aaaaaaaacccccce and r/aromantic were also very active with 166 and 90 posts respectively. The least active of these subreddits was r/AcePhilosophy with no posts collected in this sample. A few other subreddits were also virtually non-existent in the study, with r/AceAndAroArt, r/AsexualMen, r/AceTeens, and r/AromanticAsexual being represented in the sample by less than 5 posts each. A textual analysis revealed seven themes consistent across the posts in these subreddits. These themes are *Questioning*, *Coming Out*, *Dating/Having Sex*, *Pride/Community*, *Venting*, *Culture/Representation*, and *Conceptual Links*. Table 1 offers a frequency table charting the number of posts within each of these seven themes. The most common types of post were *Dating/Having Sex* and *Pride/Community*, and the theme seen least frequently was *Coming Out*. Within these themes, there are variations in the types of posts being made about these topics. As explained below, many are divided between posts involving people unsure of their asexuality or unsure about what asexuality means coming to the website asking for advice, and posts involving people who are sure of their asexuality coming to express something they think the rest of the asexual subreddit community will find relatable or worthy of discussion.

Table 1

<i>Frequency of Observed Themes in Posts on Asexual Subreddits</i>		
Themes	Frequency	Percent
Coming Out	38	5.42%
Conceptual Links	54	7.70%
Culture/Representation	119	16.98%
Dating/Having Sex	180	25.68%
Pride/Community	148	21.11%
Questioning	109	15.55%
Venting	53	7.56%
<b>Total</b>	<b>701</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

### *Questioning*

A major theme found in posts on asexual subreddits is the discovery of asexuality and the process of personally identifying with asexuality. The central way in which this theme was seen was in posts of people unsure if they are asexual coming to the subreddits and asking the community for clarification on the definition of asexuality. These posts often involve individuals detailing their sexual attraction and sexual history, recounting the elements of their lives that have caused them to question their sexuality and consider asexuality. A typical *Questioning* post reads much like a post by user AnonEssen in the r/Asexual subreddit titled “[Story] Am I? Help!” in which AnonEssen describes his past experiences with the topic of sex and how a recent sexual experience made him question his sexuality. As AnonEssen writes, “The fact is ... the more I think about my life the more the world Asexual pops up.” This post exemplifies the types of advice posts that are asked within the *Questioning* theme, as AnonEssen is very detailed with his sexual history, describing nervousness around the topic of sex with friends, his religious upbringing, and his experiences with masturbation. He is also very specific with his question. As implied by the title of the post, it is simply “Am I [asexual]? Help!” (Figure 1).

In addition to providing an insight into the individual discovery and identification of asexuality, these questioning posts are also noteworthy because of the comments that often accompany them. Comments are especially important to consider in this category of posts, as the perspective of those comments are what the poster is attempting to gain through their post. On *Questioning* posts, comments follow three main patterns: they offer support messages to the poster, provide definitions and resources to answer questions about specific orientations, and give advice based on personal experience. A comment on AnonEssen's "[Story] Am I? Help!" post which shows all three patterns is one by user 12jojo21, who writes, "The only person who can really know whether you are asexual is you, but parts of what you describe sound familiar to me (ace heteroromantic). Did you already have a look at the asexuality FAQ? This and r/asexuality in general was very helpful to me to figure out that I'm ace." Within this comment, 12jojo21 offers support by assuring AnonEssen that he's the one who can determine his sexual label, points him towards resources that might answer his questions, and advises him to utilize those resources in the same way 12jojo21 himself utilized them at this point in his own discovery of asexuality. This post shows how often the three themes of support, answering/resources, and advice are seen in a single comment to an advice post.

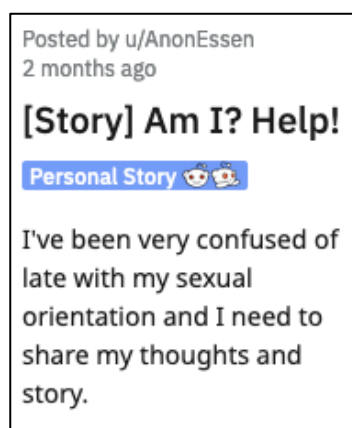


Figure 1. A text-based Questioning post. By by user AnonEssen, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Asexual/comments/ewh6gf/story\\_am\\_i\\_help/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Asexual/comments/ewh6gf/story_am_i_help/)

Outside of posts asking for advice and the responses to these posts, some users also post about *Questioning* by expressing their own moments of discovering asexuality. This is often done in a text format, with users telling stories about how they came to identify with asexuality. This is often a post expressing relief about the way their identification with asexuality helps them understand themselves better. As user rjhope7 writes in a post titled “Finally Finding Peace,” “This past weekend I had a conversation with my mother about the possibility of me being asexual. Saying the words out loud and finally getting it out of my head I feel like Ive come into my own ... Im just in a state of shock about how valid my feelings are.” Other posts utilize an image format, with pictures and memes used to depict the poster’s moment of identification of asexuality, or “How I Knew I Was Ace.” An example by user Heir0fFire titled “That probably should have tipped me off” shows a series of images in depicting how Heir0fFire discovered that they were asexual and then realized their creation of Dungeon and Dragons characters without sexual attraction was an expression of their asexuality before they realized it (Figure 2).



Figure 2. An image-based Questioning post. By by user Heir0fFire, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/aaaaaaacccccccc/comments/etciku/that\\_probably\\_should\\_have\\_tipped\\_me\\_off/](https://www.reddit.com/r/aaaaaaacccccccc/comments/etciku/that_probably_should_have_tipped_me_off/)

These posts suggest that learning about and discovering asexuality is a complicated and essential part of asexual people’s lives, and a core reason that they may use asexual subreddits as a source of community and information. This is true both for people who use the website as a

part of their discovery process, and those who return to the site after they have firmly identified as asexual to tell others about their experiences. This is exemplified in a post by AliceInEnix on r/asexuality titled “Help me understand” in which she writes, “I heard about Asexuality and I relate but I have questions I couldn’t find answers too.” As indicated by these posts, those who relate to asexuality come to these subreddits with those questions, and those who are past that point of their asexual discovery come to the site to provide those answers.

### *Coming Out*

Another main theme seen in posts on asexual subreddits is the experience of asexual people telling others about their asexuality. These posts are similar to *Questioning* posts in that they are divided between people coming to the subreddits for resources and advice and others coming to share or express their own coming out experiences. This theme primarily concerns telling friends or family about asexuality, while telling romantic or sexual partners about asexuality typically falls into the *Dating/Having Sex* theme detailed below. The posts asking for advice often involved the users detailing their connection with the friend or family member to whom they want to tell about their asexuality and asking for guidance on how to initiate and conduct that conversation. User 27Dchess exemplifies this type of post with his post in r/asexuality titled “Told my dad I was asexual and he said that’s like an automaton. Any advice on how to approach the topic again?” (Figure 3). While difficulty in coming out to parents is a common topic, other posts detail how the lack of cultural visibility of asexuality makes coming out a difficult prospect. User hopemakermachine writes about this difficulty in a post on r/asexuality, saying that asexuality is “associated with tumblr and ‘SJWs’ and all that, since it’s not Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender” and that “I know I’ll never be able to come out

because of it.” Comment responses to these posts typically involve supportive engagement and advice from previous experience, with an increased emphasis on providing resources as compared to comments on *Questioning* posts.



Figure 3. A text-based Coming Out post. By by user 27Dchess, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/ete7cz/told\\_my\\_dad\\_i\\_was\\_asexual\\_and\\_he\\_said\\_thats\\_like/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/ete7cz/told_my_dad_i_was_asexual_and_he_said_thats_like/)

The ways in which the *Coming Out* theme is expressed in posts about asexual people recounting their own coming out experiences is also very similar to the expression in *Questioning* posts. Some of them are text-based stories about individual coming out experiences, like user polymineralic’s post on r/Asexual titled “Coming out to one of my closest friends” in which they talk about their nervousness about recently having come out to a friend and invite others to tell their own stories of coming out. Others are images depicting an asexual person’s coming-out moments. While some of these are jokes, others depict the actual moment of coming out, such as a post by user mindaq which consists of a screenshot of a text message conversation about asexuality with a friend (Figure 4).

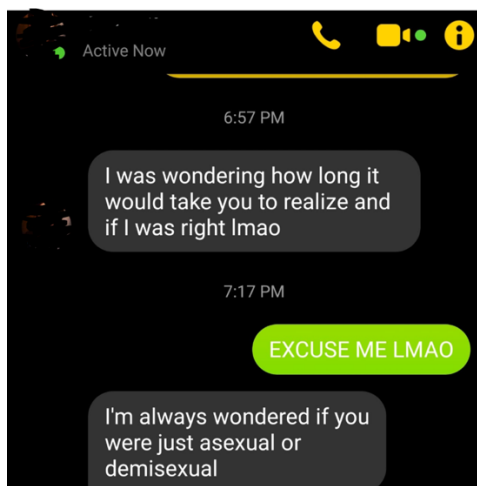


Figure 4. An image-based Coming Out post. By mindaq, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/et6ywl/i\\_recently\\_realized\\_that\\_im\\_asexual\\_i\\_told\\_my/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/et6ywl/i_recently_realized_that_im_asexual_i_told_my/)

Just as with the theme of *Questioning*, this theme suggests that coming out to others is a central element of asexuality that users visit these subreddits to connect with other asexual people over and to receive advice about.

### *Dating/Having Sex*

While asexuality is characterized by a lack of sexual attraction, many people who are asexual still date and have sex. As such, this is a common theme in asexual subreddits. Much like the previous themes, there is a split in how this shows up in posts between requests for advice and expressive posts. Advice posts from asexual people in this theme are similar to those in the *Questioning* and *Coming Out* posts. Asexual posters recount their recent dating/sexual history that has led them to their current circumstance and asks the community for guidance. In a post titled “How to make sexual experiences when asexual,” user LightsNPineapples identifies herself as an asexual virgin who is struggling between her lack of sexual attraction and her desire to have sex with someone. As she writes, “I know asexual [sic] can feel good with sex, there are asexuals who really enjoy it still. But... I don’t know how to make a good first step?” Comments

on posts such as these are similar to those in the first two themes, where commenters offer support, answers/resources, and advice. User volerllaraek exemplifies this in their response to LightsNPineapples, writing “You may want to look into aegosexuality...But also, it’s totally okay to try things out with someone you trust. It’s also okay to do nothing. It’s all up to you, and your curiosity doesn’t invalidate your identity.” Where this differs from the *Questioning* and *Coming Out* themes is that many people who are not asexual post questions within this theme, asking for advice about dating and/or having sex with an asexual person in their lives. User vickyantao offers an example of this type of post with their post on r/asexuality in which they write, “My girlfriend came out to me as an asexual after almost two years of dating” before detailing the relationship and asking, “Should I still pursue this?” This is one of the few instances in which non-asexual posters are made visible on these subreddits (Figure 5).

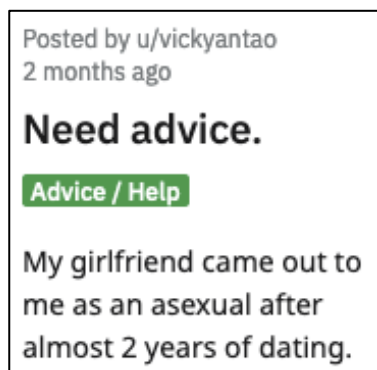


Figure 5. A text-based Dating/Having post from a non-asexual user. By by user 27Dchess, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/esttu1/need\\_advice/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/esttu1/need_advice/)

In the expressive posts within the *Dating/Having Sex* theme, few of these posts involve asexual people recounting or depicting moments of dating or having sex. Instead, asexual people often post to express the ways in which dating and having sex are not priorities in their lives, and how a presumed need of everyone to have sex does not apply to them. These post often are repurposed memes taken from elsewhere on Reddit or the internet of people talking about how they don’t want to have sex. An example is a post from the r/notinteresting subreddit by user



the\_awesome\_dude showing an empty graph labelled “I spent a year tracking my sex trends.” On the r/notinteresting subreddit, this post is likely ironic hyperbole, and serves as a self-deprecating joke about how little sex the user is having. However, when a link to the image was posted to the r/aaaaaaaacccccce subreddit by user AcidLem0n, that irony disappears, as it is reframed as an asexual image about how little interest in sex the user has.

From these posts, the ways in which dating and/or having sex plays a role in asexual lives can be seen. Advice posts indicate that these are still actions asexual people engage in, though their lack of sexual attraction or other elements of their asexual identities create complications for them and for their partners. Expressive posts, however, attempt to give voice to the option taken by many asexual people to not engage in these activities.

### *Pride/Community*

While the previous three themes centered around experiences that people brought to asexual subreddits in hopes of receiving advice from the asexual community or fostering connection to that community through expressions of shared experience, posts in the Pride/Community theme are focused on strengthening ties and meaningful symbols within the community. These posts are primarily expressive and involve asexual people displaying pride symbols, participating in community in-jokes, and providing resources and access to asexual-inclusive spaces. Pride symbols typically center around the color scheme of the asexual pride flag – purple, black, white, and grey. Many posts on these subreddits are of people showing their own pride symbols, such as MilimeterPener’s post on r/asexuality of an asexual pride flag with the words “I wont Apologize for Who I Am!” on it, while others post about how they saw the

color scheme in the outside world, such as Catnapper\_Sakura's post on r/Asexual of a purple piece of clothing in a UK clothing store (Figure 6; Figure 7).

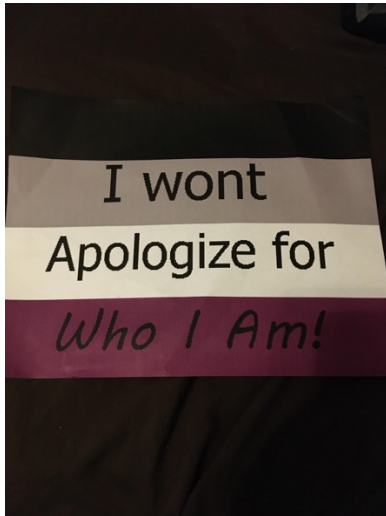


Figure 6. An image-based Pride/Community post. By MilimeterPener, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/et3qo8/friend\\_made\\_this\\_for\\_me/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/et3qo8/friend_made_this_for_me/)



Figure 7. An image-based Pride/Community post. By Catnapper\_Sakura, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Asexual/comments/esrh9e/uk\\_aces\\_ms\\_has\\_aceadjacent\\_jumpers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Asexual/comments/esrh9e/uk_aces_ms_has_aceadjacent_jumpers/)

Other orientations within the asexual spectrum often have their own flags and color schemes as well, with the green, black, white, and grey colors symbolizing aromanticism also

being seen in pride post. Outside of pride colors, another major pride symbol of asexuality are the words “asexual” and “ace” themselves. Instances of these words appearing outside of the context of the orientation (for example, in playing cards) are often co-opted and reposted into these subreddits as pride symbols. *Pride/Community* is also expressed using community in-jokes. Prominent examples of these include references to garlic bread and cake as food items that are “better than sex” and therefore symbolize an asexual indifference to sexuality. These posts are occasionally abstract and seemingly unrelated to asexuality to any reader who does not understand the connection, such as a post by MinimumExplorer on r/aaaaaaaaacccccce that is just a link to a video of “2 ½ Hours of Unedited Garlic Bread Footage.” Finally, some utilize the subreddit to provide links into other asexuality-centered or asexual-inclusive spaces. User garthepenguin posted on several subreddits announcing that they were starting a server on the Discord chat app for asexual people to play Dungeons and Dragons. These posts indicate that the creation of a cultural identity of asexuality is a core purpose of these subreddits, and that making this cultural identity a positive one centered on shared symbols and pride is a concentrated effort of asexual posters on these sites.

### *Venting*

Posts in the pride/community theme emphasize a connection with the asexual community based on positive emotions. However, other posts on asexual subreddits show that some come to the community to vent and connect over common negative emotions related to asexuality. These posts are divided into two categories, one based on the internal struggles of asexuality and the other based on external resistance to asexuality (or “aphobia”). Posts about internal struggles relating to asexuality involve asexual people recounting experiences or thoughts which left them

with negative feelings about their own asexuality. A post in r/demisexuality by luanema titled “I’m a very horny demisexual and it SUCKS” serves as an example of this type of posts. The post does not involve a detailed story or any question or request for advice. As luanema writes, “I just wanted to tell you all about my constant frustration towards my sex life as a demisexual.” Other *Venting* posts involve asexual people discussing personal encounters with other people responding negatively. These posts sometimes involve instances of harassment towards the poster because of their asexuality, such as the experience posted about by user kACE92, who writes that a man approached them to comment about their ace ring and then “he followed me out to the car and made a comment about how he could fix me and grabbed me.” Other posts involve asexual people encountering other people or situations that invalidate their asexuality, such as a post by user RemorsefulArsonist about the frequency they hear the dismissive phrase “you just haven’t met the right person yet” when coming out to people and discussing asexuality (Figure 8).

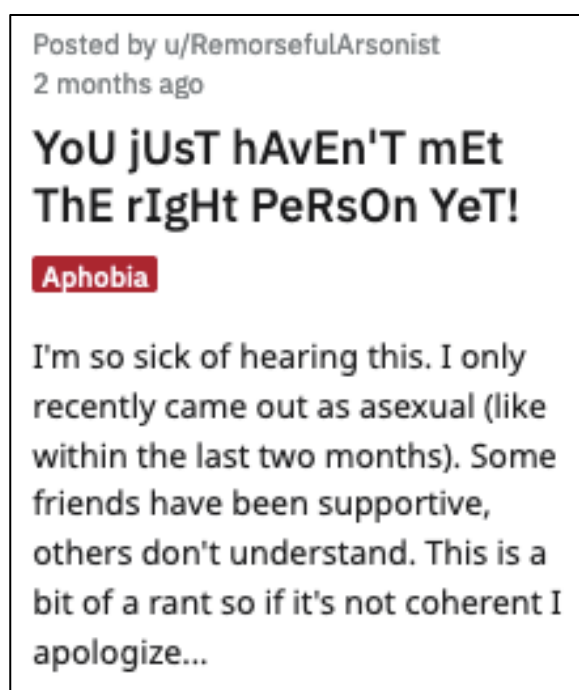


Figure 8. An text-based Venting post. By RemorsefulArsonist, 2020, retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/esl2e5/you\\_just\\_havent\\_met\\_the\\_right\\_person\\_yet/](https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/esl2e5/you_just_havent_met_the_right_person_yet/)

While previous posts have involved the expression of asexuality in the subreddits, the common topics seen in the *Venting* theme indicate that asexual people utilize these subreddits to connect with the community over the negative feelings of isolation and aphobia as well as positive feelings of pride and identity expression.

### *Culture/Representation*

Posts in asexual subreddits which focus on culture and representation do so in three distinct ways. The first is a celebration of explicit representation in media, as seen in posts such as sentientplant's post about *BoJack Horseman* titled "It's so nice to be acknowledged. I'm going to miss this character and the good work that the show has done representing the community." These posts typically offer praise for the few instances in culture where a character is explicitly depicted as asexual. Occasionally, this praise is tempered with complaints about the minimization of asexuality in media that does depict asexuality. The Netflix show *Sex Education* was a frequent target of both this praise and this criticism after an episode included a brief secondary storyline about a character discovering asexuality. As user La\_Le\_Lou writes in a post about *Sex Education*, "I really liked that they finally addressed asexuality but to me it also felt like: 'Okay, we sort of have to put it in, so let's finish this off in 3 seconds and we're good.'" This conflicted opinion shows how instances of explicit asexuality in media are celebrated, but that briefness of some of these examples do not fully satiate a desire for representation.

The second type of *Culture/Representation* post involves suggestion of implicit representation, in which people suggest that characters who are not explicitly asexual but still display a lack of sexual attraction may be thought of as asexual representation. User Hoodspitzer created a post in r/aromantic about the 2011 movie *Albert Nobbs* and how they felt the film

spoke to them as an aromantic asexual, even though there is no explicit mention of asexuality. On posts in which the user asks the community for examples of where to find asexual representation, some comments include instance where asexuality is implied but not confirmed. As Starfire-Galaxy writes in such a comment, “famous characters such as Sherlock Holmes and Sue Bridehead from *Jude the Obscure* have been theorized as asexual though their writers had not intended to give them any label.” These posts and comments indicate that due to the absence of explicit representation in media, asexual people look for subtler hints of a lack of sexual attraction in the media they consume as a way to see themselves in culture.

The third type of *Culture/Representation* post involves asexual people posting about encountering sexual elements of culture that they have trouble understanding or come into conflict with due to their asexuality. Due to the lack of asexual representation in media, this is the most common type of *Culture/Representation* post. Examples include an image posted by user RibbetRabbitManiac on r/aaaaaaacccccce of a screenshot of a tumblr post reading, “The most baffling Asexual Moment™ I’ve experienced is learning that overly-sexual commercials (like when they advertise a soda next to a girl in a bikini) actually DO turn people on and aren’t just a pointless, weird trope.” Another post by KatnissIsMyArrowAce on r/Asexual is about how she loves of The Chainsmokers song “Push My Luck” but is confused and conflicted about her enjoyment of the song because of its sexual lyrics. These posts show that a part of asexual community involves members of that community interacting with broader culture, both to find instances where they can see themselves and reflect on instances when they cannot.

### *Conceptual Links*

The final major theme found in asexual subreddits involves the consideration of several different concepts in relation to asexuality. These posts typically take the form of discussion prompts where a concept or a certain idea is presented, and the poster suggests a link between this concept and asexuality. From here, users debate and discuss the suggested connection in the comments, based on their own interpretation of asexuality and their own experiences of how asexuality affects their lives. For example, user *po1tergeisha* made a post in *r/Asexual* titled “How does your asexuality affect your gender,” in which they write that a psychology class focused on how heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality relates to gender caused them to wonder how the same could be true of asexuality. The post ends with *po1tergeisha* inviting others to discuss the link between asexuality and gender, receiving a variety of comments. These range from user *cake\_lover\_420*’s response “I’m annoyed by most physical features of maleness...it just feels kind of disgusting in some ways” to user *2pnt0*’s response “I feel less pressured to conform to the societal norms of my assigned gender.” The comments do not offer the same specific and uniform conceptualization of asexuality that is offered to people asking for advice in posts within the *Questioning*, *Coming Out*, and *Dating/Having Sex*. Instead, the comments on *Conceptual Links* posts show diversity in how asexual people individually experience, understand, and conceptualize their asexuality.

Other posts follow similar structures, in which posters outline a concept and suggest a connection between it and asexuality. Examples of these posts include *phin0915*’s “What would you consider asexual porn,” *alvingray13*’s “Do you think that asexuals are part of the LGBT community?” and *Hope1995x*’s “Sincere Question: Does ASD (autism spectrum) correlate with being asexual?” All of these posts present a concept (in these cases porn, the LGBT community, and autism spectrum disorder) and invite others to discuss the concept. This theme serves as more

of a catch-all than the other themes seen in these posts, as there is no common link between the topics of the concepts that are brought up in relation to asexuality. However, these posts are especially important in showing how asexuality is being discussed as a concept itself in these subreddits. From these posts, we can see that asexual people are utilizing this community space to deepen and expand the concept of asexuality, and are inviting others to join them in debate and discussion as they create connections between asexuality and other ideas in their lives.

### *Conclusion*

The seven themes of posts in asexuality-focused subreddits identified in this section – *Questioning, Coming Out, Dating/Having Sex, Pride/Community, Venting, Culture/Representation, and Conceptual Links* – provide a clear image of the two types of images of asexuality that can be seen in these posts. While *Questioning, Coming Out, and Dating/Having Sex* posts include many posts of asexual people discussing their experiences in discovering asexuality and understanding its implications on their lives, they also include many posts of people coming to these community spaces while still in that process of discovery, with questions about asexuality or in need of advice from the community. These people, who often does not know enough about asexuality to know if they are asexual or what their asexuality means for their lives, make up a significant section of the asexual community as it can be seen in these asexual subreddits. The other four themes show how people who are more assured of their asexuality utilize these spaces to express their positive feelings of *Pride/Community* surrounding asexuality, express their negative feelings through *Venting*, relate asexuality to their larger understanding of culture through *Representation/Culture*, or extend asexuality to other ideas and create *Conceptual Links*. This shift between the two images of asexuality as can be seen in these



themes also has a great impact on the answers to the Research Questions offered in this study about the representation, conceptualization, cultural invisibility, and symbolic annihilation of asexuality. This impact will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### *Introduction*

In this chapter the results of this study and the themes identified in the previous chapter are analyzed to answer the research questions proposed and in the context of existing research on asexuality and the theoretical lenses of queer theory and symbolic annihilation. On asexual subreddits, asexuality is represented both by asexual people and by those who believe they may be asexual and are in search of resources about asexuality. The conceptualization of asexuality matches the “lack of sexual attraction” definition found in asexual research, though discussions about the cultural implications of asexuality are less concrete and often deliberated. Finally, these subreddits were found to greatly combat asexual invisibility and symbolic annihilation for both primary types of users – asexuals and those who come to the sites to learn about asexuality. However, questions remain on how this type of representation and resource combats invisibility in larger culture, and the effect of the work done on these subreddits towards people who do not specifically come to these sites to learn about asexuality or express asexuality. The limitations of this study are also addressed in this chapter, as are potential avenues for future research.

### *Research Questions*

The first research question proposed in this study asked: How is asexual identity represented in social media user posts on subreddits focused on asexuality? Asexuality is largely distinguished by its lack of visibility in culture and society. Because information about asexuality is hard to find in the larger culture, asexual people often turn to online resources to learn about asexuality and come to understand their own sexuality (Fox & Ralston, 2016). As seen in this study, these subreddits serve as these locations of information and guidance for people struggling

to understand what asexuality means to them, and how it impacts other elements of their lives. Asexual identity is therefore represented by individuals discovering and struggling with their asexuality, and by asexual people who have gone through that process and firmly identify as asexual. Asexual identity is something concrete and inviting for those in the earlier category as they learn about the basics of definitions and community. Meanwhile, asexual identity is loose and abstract for those who are asexual and use these subreddits as an attempt to expand the identity's boundary. This looser conceptualization of asexuality reflects the inconclusive nature of work done by other researchers to chart the cultural lives of asexual people and attempt to uncover links between asexuality and other elements of their lives (Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter, 2018; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). As can be seen in the results of this study, asexual people themselves are in the process of uncovering these links for themselves, in their own lives. This second group of asexual people is also noteworthy in its performance of asexuality to the first group. When visitors come to these subreddits asking about asexuality, those who respond to them in the comments provide consistent messaging about the definition and implications of asexuality. This suggests that being able to clearly perform the role of educator and provide this messaging to those who ask is in itself an aspect of "asexual identity" as it exists in digital sites.

The second research question asked: How is asexuality conceptualized in these posts? As stated in the response to the previous research question, posts on asexual subreddits represent asexual identity in two distinct ways between people who are discovering asexuality and those who firmly identify as asexual. A similar split exists in how asexuality is conceptualized on these sites. When users come to the site asking for concrete definitions of asexuality or ask what asexual people can or cannot do, a clear and consistent definition of asexuality is provided to them. This is often very clearly stated in posts, especially within the *Questioning* theme. This is

seen in a response to a post by emasloth in r/asexuality about emasloth questioning their sexuality, where user valrae219 says clearly “Asexuality is about lack of sexual attraction. Attraction, Arousal, Desire, and Drive are not connected.” This definition is based on a lack of attraction and is consistent with the definition generally agreed upon by academic research on asexuality (e.g. Bogaert, 2004; Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Prause & Graham, 2007). Also included in this definition is the concept of a variety of related-but-distinct asexual orientations (the “ace umbrella”) as promoted by asexual and queer advocates (Arbuckle, 2014). However, what defines the second group of asexual people on the subreddits is that they all agree to and identify with this basic definition of asexuality. For this group, a large part of their engagement with these subreddits involves the expansion of the community and cultural conceptualization of asexuality. This means that these people are attempting to establish the concept of asexuality beyond the core definition. Perfectly exemplifying this is a picture post by TheBirdNerd27 on r/asexuality of a computer screen showing an essay TheBirdNerd27 is writing about asexuality. The essay is titled “A Case for the Aces: A brief definition of what it means to be Asexual.” However, in the picture the body of the essay is blank, yet to be completed. There is a unique divide in the conceptualization of asexuality in these posts. The definition of asexuality is concrete and specific, and much of the content on these posts works to spread the knowledge of that definition to those who would benefit from it. However, what asexuality means outside of this basic definition is still an open question, as can be seen by the attempts of asexual people on the site and create a cultural image of an “asexual person.”

The third research question asked: How do these posts serve to combat a cultural assumption of universal sexuality or otherwise contribute to a queer definition or understanding of asexuality? The cultural assumption of universal sexuality is challenged in a number of ways

on asexual subreddits. Each theme identified above includes posts that dismiss or argue against the idea that all humans experience sexual attraction. When the idea of universal sexuality is brought up in advice posts about *Questioning*, *Coming Out*, or *Dating/Having Sex*, the comments and responses to these posts often directly challenge that concept. *Pride/Community* and *Venting* posts often involve individuals going against assumed sexuality, with *Pride/Community* posts recounting positive experiences and *Venting* posts recounting negative experiences. Finally, posts within the *Culture/Representation* and *Concept* themes often attempt to expand the concept of asexuality through finding it in media representations or connecting asexuality to other ideas. Because asexuality runs counter to universal sexuality, expanding the concept of asexuality opens up cultural space in which universal sexuality cannot be assumed. The contributions of these subreddits to a queer understanding of asexuality is more uncertain. By spreading a definition of asexuality which is consistent with queer definitions in academic and activist understandings of asexuality, they do reinforce this way of understanding asexuality. However, the specific question of “Is asexuality queer?” does show up in many of the posts on asexual subreddits, specifically in the *Venting* or *Concept* themes. The responses to these posts are often complicated, as people within these communities disagree over asexuality’s place in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. In the comments to alvingray13’s post “Do you think asexuals are party of the LGBT community?”, there are responses ranging from redrose55x’s “I would say Asexuals easily fit within the community” to Sopia’s “I never really feel like people are talking about me when they talk about ‘the LGBTQ+ community’” to Frummagem’s “As a forty year old asexual – no. Asexuality isn’t a sexuality in the same way that atheism isn’t a religion.” This range of responses is directly reflected in previous research done on the link between queer identity and asexuality. As Mollet & Lackman (2016) found, 62% of asexual college students believed

themselves as a part of the LGBTQ community. The Mollet & Lackman study also indicated that 87% of those same students believed that asexuality as a whole should be considered as a part of the LGBTQ community, suggesting a divide between asexual individual's understanding of the concept of asexuality and their perspective on how asexuality personally impacts their life. As can be seen here, while many responses to *Questioning* and *Dating/Having Sex* posts use a definition of asexuality which is consistent with the LGBTQ+ spectrum and is used by activists and academics who do consider asexuality to be clear, directly asking this question of the community does result in a range of responses. However, the question of whether or not asexual reddit users agree on the queer classification of asexuality (or the degree to which they separate their beliefs about the definition of asexuality and their personal experience with asexuality) does not diminish the work done on these sites in combatting the assumption of universal asexuality.

The fourth and final research question asked: How do these posts serve to combat the symbolic annihilation (i.e. the absence, trivialization, and/or condemnation) of asexuality? As seen in the responses to the first three research questions, asexual subreddits create an asexual online community that primarily serves two purposes: to help facilitate the discovery of asexuality to people who believe they might be asexual, and for asexual people to connect over common experiences and discuss the concept of asexuality. In an important way, this does combat the symbolic annihilation of asexuality through the creation of a space and a subculture where asexuality is visible and not trivialized or condemned but seen as a part of identity. However, this element of these subreddits is limited in scope to that subculture, as the visibility presented here is only available to those who come to community to find visibility. In this way, these websites function as resources and sources of information about asexuality, and, as research indicates, these types of resources are commonly used by asexual people in the course

of their own identity discovery (Fox & Ralston, 2016). The sites offer a largely comprehensive representation of asexuality, with many posts acting as archives of questions people have had about asexuality, the answers to those questions by the asexuality community of the subreddit, examples of the symbols and signs that are used to signify asexuality and pride, and discussions between asexual people about how the concept of asexuality itself. To those who come to the subreddits to learn about asexuality, asexuality is made known and visible, which combats symbolic annihilation. It also makes the promotion of asexuality visibility an aspect of asexual identity, as community members within these asexual subreddits have taken on education and mentor roles to inform and support other members of the community. The creation of a space centered around asexuality and where asexual people can generally assume asexuality of other members can serve as an important stepping-stone to larger cultural visibility. This has been observed in other studies on LGBTQ+ invisibilities, where differences have been noted between intra-community visibilities and public visibility. While larger visibility in public is a difficult goal to achieve for LGBTQ+ identities, visibility within the community – in this example, asexual individuals being visible to other asexual individuals – is valuable in its creation of community and camaraderie from which activist and representational efforts can be conducted (Ross, 2008; Filipović, 2018). However, while people frequently come to these sites with questions about asexuality, it does not appear that these are spaces where people first hear about or learn about the existence of asexuality. This creates a limit on the efforts of these websites to fight symbolic annihilation, as the concept of asexuality is invisible in larger society to the point where many likely do not know of the orientation's existence and understand sexuality to be universal. While these sites do combat symbolic annihilation to those who visit them with

questions about asexuality, they do not combat symbolic annihilation to those who don't know to ask.

The constant presence of this dynamic between one group of users coming to these asexual subreddits for advice about asexuality and another group providing them clear and consistent responses to the first group also suggests that online performativity of asexuality on these sites involves users serving as media creators and mentors. While these posts seeking advice could be left without responses, or users could discourage such posts and suggest that these users seek answers elsewhere, instead the asexual community on these sites have been willing to take on this advisor role. This provides a unique insight onto the role of demand into the adoption of online performances, as the responses from the asexual community seen in these subreddit pages amounts to social media content created by regular users in response to a stated desire by other users for informational and advisory messaging and media content.

Much of the posting in asexual subreddits also involves efforts to expand of the concept of asexuality. As it exists now, these attempts are open for discussion and debate and do not result in an understanding of asexuality identity outside of the core definition of a lack of sexual attraction. These posts have not resulted in a more fully realized image of an "asexual person" outside of the basic concept of "a person who is asexual." Instead, they show that these efforts are ongoing, and that a cultural, spreadable image of asexuality is currently a work-in-progress. Research on queer theory and asexual representation offers many possible ways forward for asexuality to expand in this way. The role of intersectionality in the lives of asexual people is more prominent in the research than on these sites, as academics have considered asexuality in the context of aspects of identity including gender and disability (Cerankoski & Milks, 2010; Kim, 2011; Gupta, 2018). The conceptualization of asexuality offered by these subreddits rarely



reveals asexual people's understanding of how their sexual orientation impacts other elements of their identity. An attempt to examine specific intersections can be seen in the titles of the r/AsexualMen and r/AceTeens subreddits, but these subreddits were not as active as the more generic subreddits such as r/asexuality and are therefore not present in this study. The more popular and active subreddits in this study included ones with generic titles such as r/asexuality and r/Asexual, which further suggests that, across all of the asexual subreddits, there is a focus on asexuality as a general concept as opposed to certain subsets of asexual communities.

Queer theory has also examined asexuality and asexual invisibility in the context of a sex-centric society where "not having sex" is not seen as a valid option. This idea can be seen in posts on asexual subreddits in the context of asexual people themselves navigating in sexual culture, and how such a sexual culture can be destabilizing in an asexual person's life. In this context, the subreddits seem to provide a hugely supportive space for asexual people in these situations, as they can commiserate and vent with a larger asexual community over shared experiences. Some work on asexuality also highlights how asexuality can act as a possible "resistance" to asexual culture, as it challenges the premise of universal sexuality (Pryzbylo, 2011; Gupta, 2017). While the posts on asexual subreddits do clearly outline the challenges that many asexual individuals experience in navigating sexual culture, what is less present from the community is this sense of resistance, or an image created by the community of what a potential ideal culture could or should look like. One aspect of asexuality that is not clear from these sites is what suggestions asexual people have on how to make the world more accepting towards asexuality, or on how to make the option of "not having sex" more available and acceptable for people of all sexual orientations. However, it remains an open question whether or not this is a

goal for the asexual community, as research indicates that many do not see themselves as radicals or subversive to a sex-centric society (Dawson, Scott & McDonnell, 2018).

### *Summary*

Research questions which were derived from the literature review and guided this study were answered using data from posts on asexual subreddits. A split in the representation of asexuality can be seen in this data, as posts on asexual subreddits came from both those who are asexual and wished to discuss asexuality with an online community, and those who believe they may be asexual or have questions about asexuality and come to the website as an informational and supportive resource. This split can also be seen in the conceptualization of asexuality on the site, as a succinct and consistent definition was provided to those who came to the website for information, while open-ended discussions about the concept of asexuality were common in other types of posts. These subreddits were also found to contribute to asexual visibility and combat symbolic annihilation by creating a space for individuals to discuss and perform asexuality, but how these representations serve to combat invisibilities outside of these subcommunities is still an open question.

### *Limitations*

While this study did benefit from examining spaces where asexuality is a defining element of the digital subcommunities observed, the exclusion of other social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.) is also a limitation here, as the findings of Reddit specifically may not apply to other digital spaces. Examinations of asexual posts on other social media sites may have also given a better sense of asexual visibility outside of subcommunities dedicated to

asexuality, as Reddit is distinct from other social media sites due to its focus on cultivating this type of specific subcommunities. Sampling was also a limitation of this study. The inclusion of ten subreddits was meant to provide a wide range of sources even within the specific boundaries of “asexual subreddits.” However, nearly half of the subreddits were represented by only a handful of posts each and were made virtually invisible in the sample. This limitation is especially concerning given that the most active subreddits, including r/asexuality and r/Asexual, are the most general, and that some of the least active subreddits, including r/AsexualMen and r/AceTeens, involved subsets of asexual identity and could have provided more information on asexuality and intersectionality than is provided in the current study.

### *Future Research*

The status of asexuality in modern culture is clear both in the research already done on asexuality and in the results of this study, with visibility and education being a central focus of asexual people. These subreddits show that asexual people use digital asexual spaces to spread the core definition of asexuality while expanding the cultural definition of asexuality. Because of this, it appears that asexuality is in a state of flux. Future research should examine what it would take for asexuality to reach a higher status of visibility and look to similar trends in previously invisible groups of people to envision what possibilities and potential struggles may exist for asexuality once it reaches a higher level of cultural visibility. For example, what would it take for a singular cultural image of asexuality (e.g. a popular asexual character in media, an asexual celebrity, or a well-known asexual activist figure) to transcend the bounds of cultural invisibility? And if such a thing were to occur, would that image be subject to symbolic annihilation through trivialization or condemnation? Or, would the asexual community be

subject to stereotyping based on that image? Additionally, as asexual representation increases in popular culture, research looking at the effects of these representations on the knowledge and views of audience members without awareness of asexuality will prove helpful in understanding the power of such representations. Future research may also apply these findings and examine digital communities, online representation and identity, and social media content and performances of other culturally invisible or symbolically annihilated communities.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this research was to understand the representation and expression of asexuality online through a textual analysis of subsections of the Reddit social media site dedicated to asexual. In analyzing these subreddits, this study found consistent themes relating to the discovery of asexuality, coming out as asexual, and understanding the impact of one's asexuality on their relationship. Additionally, other themes showed that these spaces were used by asexual people to express pride and to discuss the concept of asexuality. These findings show that the subreddits are indeed a space for asexual expression and representation, and that the conceptualization of asexuality utilized by these social media users is consistent, within the community and with academic and activist understandings. These spaces and resources do combat asexual invisibility, assumptions of universal sexuality, and symbolic annihilation through the posts and comments created by users. However, it remains an open question how this type of representation centered around internal visibility and education combats invisibilities outside of the confines of the community. These findings are significant because they indicate how asexual individuals perform and conceptualize asexuality online, as well as how internet spaces such as asexual subreddits are used by individuals as a resource for information about

asexuality. While asexuality remains largely absent in culture and society, spaces and communities such as these are likely the first steps towards wider visibility.

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<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-017-0100-y>.

# Kyle Webster

*Curriculum Vitae*

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## EDUCATION

### **M.A., Media Studies, Syracuse University**

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Expected May 2020

Thesis: A Textual Analysis of Online Asexual  
Representation and Visibility on Reddit

*Advisor: Carol Liebler*

### **B.S., Journalism: Media Studies, University of Oregon**

School of Journalism and Communication

June 2018

Minors: English; Women, Gender, & Sexuality

## RESEARCH INTERESTS

Asexuality & Queer Representation

Sexual Health & #MeToo

Television Studies

## PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Smith, A., Holland, S., **Webster, K.**, & Mucedola, A. (2020). Sexual Consent Is “Not” Sexy: A Content Analysis of Sexual Scripts in Teenage-Based Netflix Shows. Scheduled for presentation at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Gold Coast, AU.

Smith, A., Holland, S., **Webster, K.** (2020). The Road to Redemption or the Path to Backlash: Understanding Media Framing of Celebrity Comebacks in the #MeToo Era. Scheduled for presentation at the annual conference of the Western States Communication Association, Denver, CO.

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

Webster, K. Emerging Narratives of Asexuality on Television: *BoJack Horseman*, *Shadowhunters*, & *Riverdale*

## EXPERIENCE

### **S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University**

*Research Assistant*

June 2019 – May 2020

- Served as a research assistant to Carol Liebler, Professor of Communications at the Newhouse School.

- Assisted in gathering research on various media topics related to Professor Liebler's work. This included theoretical work on concepts of marginalization, cultural invisibility, and symbolic annihilation, and statistical work on demographic information, gender and racial discrimination, and news coverage of missing children and women.
- Communicated with professors and researchers of other schools and departments to help facilitate research collaboration.

### **S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University**

*Instructional Associate*

August 2018 – December 2019

- Acted as an associate in the teaching of COM 408: Advertising and Public Relations Law, an undergraduate communications law class at the Newhouse School. Worked with Professors Nina I. Brown and Glen Funkhouser over the course of three semesters.
- Graded various exams & assignments while working with these professors to ensure that students received clear and constructive feedback on their work.
- Communicated and met with students to discuss issues relating to the class, ensure that the tasks expected of students were clear, and address any concerns or problems as they occurred.
- Organizational tasks, including the maintenance of attendance records and grade-books.
- Attended class sessions, held regular office hours, and assisted in the administration of exams.