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ACE INVISIBILITIES: ASEXUAL SOCIAL IDENTITY THROUGH PODCASTING AND DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Asexuality is a growing topic of sexuality and media scholarship as representations and expressions of asexual identity have seen a small but significant rise in traditional and digital media throughout the 21st century. However, much of the existing media and scholarship has focused on the definition and self-identification of asexuality. This emphasis has lead to a research gap in the consideration of asexual social identity and its expression in media spaces. To address this gap, this textual analysis study examined the content and social media fan reception of the asexual conversation and interview podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay* through the theoretical lenses of social identity theory, positionality, and intersectionality. This study found several themes of asexual social identity: self-discovery narratives about identifying with asexuality, relevant comparisons with the non-asexual ("allosexual") outgroup, a recognition of the limitations of "lack" as a central concept of asexual identity, and an expression of the unique social position, reaction to cultural norms, and critical possibilities of asexuality. Common throughout these themes is a unique asexual approach to the identification and naming of culturally invisible assumptions and experiences of sexual identity and social identity. In considering asexuality and intersectionality, gender was found to be a crucial consideration, but the shaping influence of race, class, and disability on asexuality were found to be still-existing unexamined invisibilities.

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ASEXUAL SOCIAL IDENTITY THROUGH PODCASTING AND DIGITAL MEDIA

by

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, the sexual orientation of asexuality and the history of its description and definition in academic literature and online activism groups is outlined. Through an examination of this literature, the social identity of asexuality is specified as a unique area unaccounted for by work done clarifying the boundaries of asexuality and the habits and perspectives of asexual people. One area that has been understudied in how it contributes to asexual social identity is media that asexual people create about asexuality. To guide such an investigation into asexual media and the specific asexuality-focused podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay* and its online presence, three research questions are provided.

Within the spectrum of LGBTQIA+ identities of sexual orientation, the "A" refers to asexuality and asexual people. As defined by the advocacy group Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), "an asexual person does not experience sexual attraction - they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way" (Overview, n.d.). As a form of non-sexuality, asexuality advocates also emphasize the distinction between asexuality as an orientation and other forms of nonsexuality that involve a choice to turn away from sexuality and sexual activities (i.e., celibacy). Instances of such asexuality and nonsexuality have been observed for many decades, but the concept of an asexual orientation as it exists today emerged in the 2000s. This came as internet communities and activist groups such as AVEN, which was founded in 2001, sought to create communities of asexual people on the internet, and as sex researchers and sociologists – notably, Bogaert (2004) - aimed to distinguish asexuality as a sexual orientation in the literature as separate from certain sex disorders. Bogaert's early studies also estimated the population of asexual people in the U.K. at one percent and this number is still commonly cited as the rough estimation of the asexual population. In the

years since, asexuality has continued as a topic of theory and research, with the understanding that it exists as a part of the queer/LGBTQIA+ umbrella, with researchers focusing on asexual people as a population and articulating its implications on theories of sexuality and gender (Cerankowski & Milks 2010). Table 1 identifies some common terminology describing the asexuality orientation and related terms, as they have been articulated by both the existing literature and by popular resources such as AVEN. However, asexuality remains largely invisible in Western culture, referred to by some as the "Invisible Orientation" (Decker 2015). In response, asexual activists and authors have attempted to combat this invisibility through efforts in community-building and in spreading AVEN's definition of asexuality. In popular media, work done made by asexual figures such as author Angela Chen and model Yasmin Benoit has attempted to publicly refute and dispel common myths about asexuality through their writing and social media presence (Neilson, 2020, Turner 2022).

Table 1

Common Terminology of Asexuality

Term	Definition
Asexuality	A sexual orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction to others. Sometimes abbreviated to **ace.**
Grey-asexuality	A sexual orientation existing within the "grey" area between allosexuality and asexuality. Used to define individuals who sometimes experience sexual attraction but infrequently or at a low intensity, such that they also identify with asexuality.
Aromanticism	A romantic orientation defined by a lack of romantic attraction to others. Sometimes abbreviated to **aro**. The suffix "romantic/romanticism" are often applied to other concepts in asexuality to mark this distinction (e.g. "grey-romanticism," "alloromanticism")
Asexual Spectrum / Asexual Umbrella	A collected assortment of identities related to or closely identified with asexuality, including grey-asexuality and aromanticism. Sometimes abbreviated to **a-spec**.
Allosexuality	A sexual orientation defined by a presence of sexual attraction to others. Occasionally more generally referred to as "sexuality," this encompasses other sexual orientations such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bi-sexuality. Sometimes abbreviated to **allo**.

Note. These definitions are summarized from "General FAQ" by AVEN, https://www.asexuality.org/?q=general.html.

Although research that outlines and negotiates the core definition of asexuality is prominent (e.g., Prause & Graham 2007, Scherrer 2008, Brotto et al 2010), as is research that explores the sexual and relationship lives of asexual people (e.g., Brotto & Yule 2011, Vares 2017), what defines the asexual community outside of its approach to sexuality and its central definition as a "lack of sexual attraction" remains a topic largely unexplored in research. In the interview research of Rothblum, Heimann, and Carpenter (2018) on asexual people's lives in education, work, religious, and community contexts, they observe that many of their asexual participants had not considered their asexual identity as impacting their relationship to non-sexual contexts and institutions. They write that in previous research, participants had extensive accounts of how they came to identify as asexual and the impact of asexuality on their participations in cultures of sex, which the researchers compare to the importance of the "coming out" story on a variety of LGBTQ+ identities. In their interviews with participants on contexts other than sexuality, they note that "in contrast, participants did not have as much to say about the role of their asexual identity in non-sexual roles" (pg. 92). Such a consideration was a novel experience, and "at times participants seemed not to have given these questions much thought in the past" (pg. 92). These examples from interviews with asexual people suggest that the discussion of asexuality as an approach to sexual relationships and activities is relevant and active in the perception of asexuality, but that other considerations of how asexuality exists alongside other queer and identity categories as a social identity remain elusive.

As emphasized by these trends in asexualities research, social identity remains a significant gap in efforts to outline asexual identity and better describe the asexual community. Social identity, the meanings and self-perceptions held by individuals through their membership in social groups, has been studied through several theoretical perspectives, many of which hold

promise to clarify this question of asexual social identity. This includes the emphasis on in-group and out-group dynamics from social identity theory as originated by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the attention paid to ever-changing social contexts and relationships as within positionality as articulated by Alcoff (1988), and the approach towards multiple axes of identity in relation to power within intersectionality as coined by Crenshaw (1991). Some of these theoretical lenses have already been used around asexual contexts, such as work done on queer social identity theory (e.g., Krane et al, 2002; Jenkins et al, 2019) and intersectional analyses that detail the contributions of asexuality on the larger construction of sexuality and identity (e.g., Kim, 2014; Owen, 2018). Much of what underlines these research trends is an interest in narratives of sexual norms and sexual identity that define and give meaning to a variety of different types of sexual identities, including types of nonsexuality.

Given this significance of narratives in the literature, asexual media is a fruitful yet largely unexamined topic for asexualities research and understanding of asexual social identity. Understanding how asexuality is negotiated in media explicitly centered around asexual identity, and the ways in which such media is in turn negotiated by its audience, presents an opportunity to better understand how asexual people are negotiating the meaning of their sexual orientation. Although the history of asexual characters, particularly within 21st century U.S. and U.K. television programming, provides insight into cultural images of nonsexuality, more recent examples of asexual media created and produced by asexual people, often on topics of asexuality, offer better opportunities to examine this negotiation of identity.

In particular, the asexual comedy/discussion podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay*, which has continued from 2017 to the present day, has a rich enough catalog of media content and an active enough social media presence and engagement to make such an analysis of this content and

engagement possible and fruitful. Of the handful of podcasts about asexuality and hosted by asexual people which were developed in the late 2010s, *Sounds Fake But Okay* is the most popular and longest lasting. The premise of the podcast is that its asexual hosts, Kayla Kaszyca and Sarah Costello, discuss and deconstruct relationship dynamics, popular media, and other aspects of life and culture from an asexual perspective. Examples of topics covered include catfishing, weddings, ghosting, and pickup lines. Some episodes also include broader discussions about topics related to asexuality and queer identities such as the split attraction model and pride celebrations, or interviews with asexual people such as *Ace Notes* author Michele Kirichanskaya and asexual race car driver Michael Klein. The title of *Sounds Fake But Okay* refers to a common negative reaction to asexuality encountered by some asexual people as they describe their orientation, repurposed here to cast asexuality as normal and the topics of sexual and romantic relationships and media discussed as "sounding fake."

This study contributes to asexuality research and academic understandings of asexual people by utilizing textual analysis to assess both the content of the asexual podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay* and the social media engagement with the podcast. Using theoretical lenses associated with social identity, this analysis will identify markers of asexual identity that broaden and enrich our understanding of this orientation and community. To achieve these aims, three research questions are used to guide the data collection and analysis process. The first two RQs aim to collect information on the ingroup formation and power dynamics of asexual identity through the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast:

> RQ1: How is asexuality constructed as a social identity in *Sounds Fake But Okay*, in relation to various outgroups and in the context of the power dynamics and intersectional identity links of gender, race, class, and disability?

RQ2: How is asexuality constructed as a social identity in the social media response to the podcast, in relation to various outgroups and in the context of the power dynamics and intersectional identity links of gender, race, class, and disability?

Finally, research question 3 places the podcast content in the context of previous asexual representation in media, to analyze unique aspects of representation in podcasting and digital media as compared to previous asexual media such as television characters and story arcs:

RQ3: What narratives of asexuality and identity are provided by *Sounds Fake But Okay* in comparison to pre-existing asexual media narratives?

As an asexual person who is male, White, middle-class, and able-bodied, my own relationships to these identity categories will necessarily influence my perspective and analysis of these research questions. The experience described by many asexual people in research on self-discovery, of finding asexual language using internet sources and using such resources to incorporate asexuality into self-identity, was my experience with asexuality as well. This includes the experience of feeling welcome and invited into online asexual spaces, an experience that has often been more available to White asexuals and other asexual people with privilege. Though I have not been personally invested or attracted to such online asexual spaces since discovering my own asexuality, my professional interest in online asexual spaces and media content is informed by a curiosity about their exclusionary histories and the implications of media representations and discourses into asexuality as a concept.

This study will contribute to efforts by researchers to understand the lives and experiences of asexual people outside of surveys and interviews about their sexual lives, outline an emergent form of asexuality media representation, and bring to Social Identity Theory,

positionality, and intersectionality an understanding of how processes of identification, comparison, and identity negotiation apply to the social identity of asexuality.

In the second chapter of this study, a literature review is conducted on relevant histories of asexualities research, social identity as conceptualized through a variety of theoretical lenses, media representation and expression of asexuality, and digital media. The research questions informed by this literature are used to guide the analysis of podcast and social media data of *Sounds Fake But Okay*. In the third chapter, the methodology of textual analysis used in collecting the data is detailed, along with specific procedures for sampling and coding. In the fourth chapter, relevant themes from the textual analysis are discussed. The fifth chapter specifically addresses the research questions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, the relevant literature is reviewed and applied to the current study. It includes descriptions of social identity theory, positionality, and intersectionality as relevant theoretical lenses to the present question of asexual social identity. The history of asexual studies and asexuality within queer studies will also be addressed and described. This section will also include a history of asexuality narratives in literature and media representations, with a specific focus on the increase of asexual representation in Western television in the 2010s. Finally, the areas of digital media and social media centered around asexuality will be explored, including the asexual podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay.*

The prominence of asexuality in research on social identity and sexual orientation is relatively recent, but establishes sexual attraction, sexual normalcy, nonsexuality, visibility, and community as key concepts in modern asexuality. As a topic of sexualities research, asexuality rose in prominence during the mid-2000s. Notable work by social psychologist Anthony Bogaert conceptualized and contrasted asexuality against inhibitive sex disorders, defining it as “the absence of a traditional sexual orientation, in which an individual would exhibit little to no sexual attraction" (Bogaert, 2004). Bogaert’s work, in which he argues for the consideration of asexuality as a distinct sexual orientation and approximates from data on British residents that one percent of the population is asexual, was influential in the study of asexuality in social sciences and was “the first known empirical study of asexuality” (Cerankowki & Milks 2010, pg 653). Additional work conceptualizing methods for studying asexuality and asexual people continues following Bogaert’s study. Prominent examples include early interview and survey research with participants who self-identify as asexual (e.g., Prause & Graham, 2007; Brotto et

al., 2010) and research that examines cultural narratives of asexuality in the context of a culture that normalizes and universalizes sexuality (e.g., Kim, 2011; Przybylo, 2011).

In much of the research on the theoretical implications of asexuality and the lived experiences of asexual individuals and communities, compulsory sexuality serves as the defining trait of sexual "normalcy" against which asexuality stands. The concept describes a number of assumptions about sexuality, including "the assumption that all people are sexual; the norms and practices that compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity; and the norms and practices that marginalize various forms of nonsexuality" (Gupta, 2015, pg. 135). Asexuality as a self-identified orientation of nonsexuality challenges this concept of compulsory sexuality and is addressed directly in research on asexual people. For example, Carrigan's (2011) work on asexual communities describes confronting these assumptions as a common experience of his asexual participants on the path to identifying as asexual, and writes that "this 'sexual assumption', which sees sex as a culmination of and prerequisite for human flourishing, was encountered by a majority of participants" (pg. 474).

Existing alongside these research trends is the development of an information network and web community, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), in 2001, and the media prominence of its founder, David Jay (About Asexuality, n.d.). This development raised the visibility of asexuality and saw a community of asexual people claim a queer identity. By the mid-2010s, the consideration of asexuality in both research and community work had developed as existing in queer contexts and challenging assumptions of heteronormativity and assumed universal sexuality. Writing on this development in the introduction for an edited volume on asexuality research, prominent asexual researchers Cerankowski and Milks (2010) note of these

developments as “necessitating the addition of an ‘A’ in the sexuality studies field, in courses on gender and sexuality, in activist movements, and in discussions of minority representation and visibility” (pg. 3).

As indicated by the development of the AVEN organization, visibility and representation of asexuality has been a focus of activist and research work on asexuality. AVEN focuses on spreading the definition of asexuality and challenging myths and misconceptions, as its key goals are “creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community” (About AVEN, n.d.). Other work has commented on the challenge of invisibility that faces asexuality. The title of a mass market book explaining asexuality, “The Invisible Orientation” (Decker 2015), speaks to this conception of asexuality as absent in cultural life and to the centrality of invisibility in understanding asexuality as it currently is conceived. Other work has highlighted underrepresentation in television and film, in which asexual characters are almost completely absent from major studio films, and broadcast, cable, and streaming television (2021 GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index, 2021; Where We Are on TV Report—2021-2022, 2022). The impact of underrepresentation is not directly addressed in research on asexual people, but asexual participants have indicated this as a concern. In Rothblum, Heimann, and Carpenter’s (2018) work on the lives of asexual people, the positive effects of media representation and the isolating effects of media invisibility were brought up by several participants, even though these topics were not a part of the structured interview. This indicates that media representation is a significant research gap in current asexuality studies.

Some studies on asexuality, such as the Rothblum, Heimann, and Carpenter (2018) study mentioned above, have moved away from definitional or theoretical considerations of asexuality and interviewed asexual people to better understand the approach to asexuality taken by those

who identify with the label. Much of this research focuses on the sexual lives of asexual people. Studies within this category generally examine the sexual attitudes, activities, and attractions of asexual communities within a culture of assumed universal sexuality (e.g., Brotto & Yule, 2011; Gupta, 2017; Zheng & Su, 2021; McInroy et al., 2021). Others focus on more specific topics related to sexuality to understand how it is approached by asexual people, with examples of topics including partnered relationships (Vares, 2017; Antonsen et al., 2020), high school sex talk (Yang, 2023), masturbation and sexual fantasy (Yule et al., 2017), fetishes (Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021), and the process of coming out (Robbins, Low, and Query, 2016). The focus on the sexual lives of asexual people has also been noted by researchers attempting to outline and characterize the asexual community and the lives of asexual people outside of sex and relationships. The Rothblum, Heimann, & Carpenter (2018) study directly states this as a goal, noting that "it is ironic that much of the research on asexuality has come from surveys of sexual behavior, and thus focused on (relative lack of) sex and relationships" (pg. 83), and comparing this focus to early studies on gay and lesbian populations that were primarily interested only in the deviations from sexual norms found in these communities. Their study, focusing explicitly on the lives of asexual people in areas not directly related to sexuality, also suggests that many of those within the asexual community similarly struggle to consider or articulate the impact of their asexuality outside of the contexts of sex and relationships. The researchers describe several instances within the interview process in which their asexual participants had not reflected on their asexual identity in contexts such as work, school, or religion. As they write, "at times participants seemed not to have given these questions much thought in the past" (pg. 92). The researchers directly compared these moments with similar work they had done interviewing asexual participants about their "coming out" moments of identification with asexuality. When

describing coming out the participants had “long and detailed answers,” while in other contexts, “participants did not have as much to say about the role of their asexual identity in non-sexual roles such as school, jobs, their community, or religion” (pg. 92).

This review suggests a research gap and a significant challenge in research on asexuality as a social identity. With the focus on visibility and education in the activism work on asexuality, and a focus on definition and sexuality within the research literature, it is understandable that asexual people have a language for explaining their orientation and articulating its impact on their sexual lives, and do not have similar easy access to ways to describe the impact of asexuality on their lives and social identities beyond those contexts. As much of the research has centered on the question of definition and understandings of asexuality, there has been less consideration on what common threads, ideas, or representations create definitions and understandings of “an asexual person.”

Social Identity Theory

Research on asexuality has thus far neglected the question of social identity and the negotiations of asexual self-perception. To address this gap, it will be useful to consider a variety of theoretical lenses through which social identity has been examined: social identity theory, intersectionality, and positionality.

The establishment of social identity theory (SIT) was in the work by Tajfel and Turner, who analyzed inter-group conflicts and found that in-group bias was a significant factor and theorized a set of processes that establish the in-group and through which individuals create a positive self-image of the group identity. These early works also outlined the two main processes of identification: the internalization of the in-group identity in the individual, and opportunities

to make relevant comparisons between in-group and out-group and see the in-group in a positive light (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner and Reynolds, 2010).

Within SIT, the desire for positive self-image has been identified in two types of sentiments that inspire different responses based on their sentiment towards the in-group: positive identity verification and negative identity nonverification (Davis et al 2019). Following the need to associate one's own social identity and in-group with a positive image, individuals respond with distress and engage in defensive responses and strategies when confronted with images of the social identity that go against the standard set of meanings associated with the social identity, and experience "nonverification." This process can occur through media, especially when people engage with media explicitly focused on a specific identity that they may identify with, such as asexuality, or when confronted with ideas applicable to broader notions of identity, such as the idea that all humans are sexual beings. Through the analysis of media, many of these markers and their influence on the process of collective identity development can be observed, as media makers present definitions and evaluations of social identities that individuals may respond to with identity verification or evaluations of their own, or as the standards, cultural practices, and beliefs of a collective identity are represented and reproduced through media, or as certain types of media use and engagement become their own cultural practices within a social identity. Negative stereotypes have been considered as a result of the comparison process, but also, positive representation is thought to both improve perceptions of the in-group to in-group members, and overall perceptions (McKinley et al, 2014).

Positionality

The theory of positionality has also been used to conceptualize and navigate the relationship between individual identity, collective identity, and social groups. Positionality

considers the social identity of individuals as multiple and overlapping and, as originally articulated by Alcoff (1988) places an emphasis on the context of social relations and their influence on the creation of social identity. As Alcoff describes in her application of this concept to the social category of gender, “the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context,” and “the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning” (pg. 434). From this description, positionality can be articulated as both an analysis of the cultural context surrounding individuals and their relationship to social groups and identities, and as an understanding that this social position can be the starting point for the construction of knowledge. Drawing on this second use, positionality and its related concept of reflexivity has been a subject of much work on research methods, education, and epistemology, with theorists and researchers considering better ways to record and measure information and knowledge from the interaction between participants and researchers and their social positions (e.g. Bourke, 2014; Bukamal, 2022; Kapinga, Huizinga, and Shaker, 2022).

In considering positionality as a meaningful location of individuals within social contexts and in relation to social groups, some researchers have considered positionality as a useful comparison to intersectional approaches to identity and the organizational project of identity politics. Tien (2019) articulates these approaches in their analysis of social justice education, writing that identity politics is seen as “useful for social empowerment and coalition building” (pg. 529) as it works to affirm group identities and develop group consciousness. Meanwhile, others considering positionality as a poststructuralist perspective (Tien cites Judith Butler and performativity as one such branch of feminist research) find that “identity categories use the same discourses as, and thus reinscribe, the very socially constructed categories they aim to

contest" (pg. 529). The danger of overly essentializing identity, even intersectional identity, thus leads to the embrace of social context analysis and positionality lenses.

Intersectionality

Social identity is also a concept that has been explored through the theoretical lens of intersectionality. Where social identity theory addresses the processes, psychologies, and motivated behaviors of identification with a social group, intersectionality acknowledges that social identification often involves the negotiation and interaction of many social identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. As a theoretical lens, intersectionality addresses the unique experiences and sociologies of those existing at specific intersections of identity. For example, Kimberlie Crenshaw's (1991) early use and coinage of the term described the oppression experienced by women of color as something that could not be satisfactorily challenged or examined on either the single axis of sexism or the single axis of racism.

In his discussion of SIT and intersectionality in the context of education, Tapper (2013) highlights an inattention to power dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups and the potential for individuals to overly internalize group identities, or to see their own various group membership for competing for salience and adopt certain identities at the expense of others as chief concerns in the application of SIT. The addition of intersectionality concepts is then proposed by Tapper to address these concerns, highlighting the ability of an intersectional framing to account for group dynamics, unique situations of multiple group identities, and personal conceptions of individual identity. Tapper identifies these qualities as creating an exploratory possibility of intersectionality, where the process of understanding the intersectional relationship between individual and group identity creates an opportunity to better conceptualize power dynamics, Othering, and struggles between identity groups.

Through the understanding of social identity theory, positionality, and intersectionality as approaches to social identity, key concepts and questions of social identity can be established which will contribute to the analysis of asexual social identity. From SIT, the emphasis of self-image and on markers of identity urges an analysis of media representations as areas of identity comparison and verification. Intersectionality and positionality encourage a reflexive analysis, with considerations towards social contexts and dynamics of power. While each of these theories are distinct in their consideration of instrumental contexts in establishing social identity and shaping experiences relating to identity formation, using all three as approaches to examine asexuality provides an opportunity to create a well-rounded outline of asexual social identity and its various shaping contexts.

Queer Social Identity

Although asexuality itself as a social identity is not well-articulated in the literature, there has been work that has considered queer identity through the lens of social identity theory and that has considered the intersectional relationship between asexuality and other aspects of identity. Examining these themes of research will help clarify the relevant questions towards an understanding of asexuality as a social identity.

Much of the work on Social Identity Theory as it relates to queer identity utilizes the in-group/out-group dynamics at the theory's origin to examine engagements and perceptions between queer groups and social institutions, with a broad focus on the negative effects of stigma and discrimination (e.g. Miles-Johnson and Death, 2019; Dahling et al, 2016). Inversely, studies examining the positive effects of increased salience and positive experiences identifying with queer communities and activities does produce the predicted improvements to self-image and self-esteem assumed in SIT (Krane et al, 2002). Methods involved in this process include a

redefinition of the group in positive terms, reaffirming a willingness to build community, and a rejection of outside support seen as coming from insincere sources (Jenkins et al, 2019). These trends in queer social identity highlight the importance of verification and nonverification in understanding the effects of media representation and the importance of such dynamics in the development of collective identity, while also suggesting specific ways in which these dynamics play out for those who identify with queer sexual orientations.

Asexuality has not been a topic addressed within Social Identity Theory, as studies utilizing SIT as a framework have centered more on other identities within the queer spectrum. Much of this work queer on sexual and gender identities returns to contexts of group conflicts. Specifically, much of this work highlights groups in particularly tenuous spaces in which certain aspects of their identities conflict or come under increased scrutiny, such as queer people within or in encounters with religious institutions, organizations, and communities (Harrison and Michelson 2015, Koc et al. 2022). This branch of SIT research charts out ways in which people inhabiting these identities and encountering these conflicts negotiate, strategically interpret various elements of identity, and the effects of these actions on well-being and psychology (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer 2016, Flanders 2016). Other research in queer contexts focuses on heterosexuality as an in-group and as a social identity, and the ways in which attitudes and ideas about queer people as an outgroup are constructed and maintained (Falomir-Pichastor & Hegarty 2013; Read, van Driel, & Potter 2018).

One trend in asexuality research concerning the self-identification of asexual people does approach similar themes of identity development and evaluations of in-groups and out-groups as seen in Social Identity Theory. These studies often come from a methodological need of asexuality studies to rely on self-reported asexual people as survey and interview participants,

and thus consider this process of self-identification and its impacts on community-building and asexual research. Carrigan (2011) identifies the key tension between the understood and settled definition of asexuality and the social understanding of asexuality in his mixed-methods work on self-identified asexuality, commenting on the diversity of experiences found throughout the asexual community and writing that "this diversity stands in contrast to the common experiences and needs which people bring to the asexual community" (pg. 476). Elsewhere, MacNeela and Murphy (2015) identified three themes that characterized asexual participant's interview responses to questions about self-identification with asexuality: an awareness of asexuality as lacking social credibility and managing threats of disbelief in social settings, a satisfaction and positive contribution of identification with asexuality to the sense of self on an individual level, and difficulties understanding the relationship between asexuality and other connections with identity categories with age, gender, nationality, and spirituality.

This last theme of MacNeela and Murphy's interviews with asexual participants is also significant because the intersectional relationship between asexuality and other identity categories has been the subject of some asexualities research. In terms of narratives of sexuality and asexuality that construct a vision and a figure of sexual "normalcy" through which to impose an "abnormality," race, gender, and disability are three common topics of intersection with asexuality. A common and notable observation made about modern communities of self-identified asexuality is its overwhelming whiteness. Some of the most observant commentary about this aspect of asexuality can be found in examples of books about asexuality. As Angela Chen writes in *Ace* (2020), the early history of the asexual movement created a culture of whiteness through its many White figureheads: "asexuality isn't only associated with whiteness because of its famous faces. Asexuality is also associated with whiteness because of the

complicated ways that sexuality intersects with race" (pg. 68). Chen's work in Ace interviewing asexual people of color highlights a variety of struggles in navigating racism in asexual and queer communities, alongside queerphobia in communities centered around race. In *Asexual Erotics* (2019) Ela Przybylo also discusses these dynamics, and highlights that one of the enforced narratives of white supremacy is the inherent claim of whiteness in all aspects. In reacting to the violence of the "incel" community and the anger of denied sex that fuels such violence, Przybylo writes that "The case of the incel thus demonstrates how white supremacists and alt-right men can mobilize language of injury and victimhood, as well as savior ship, misreading the historically grounded legacies of injustice. Political celibacy/asexuality also becomes used in tyrannical ways to justify misogyny and racism" (pg. 141). Though Przybylo is speaking on the violent sense of ownership felt by those who reject an asexuality identity and consider their own lack of sexual activity a failure to be blamed on women, the idea that such a claim of ownership may also influence the relationship between white asexuals and "their" communities is not far-fetched. As Przybylo notes, "if anything, incel-inspired tyranny demarcates the ways in which it is imperative that compulsory sexuality be analyzed as a site at which whiteness and patriarchy intersect" (pg. 141).

In terms of narratives of nonwhite bodies, the work of Ionna Hawkins Owen is crucial in its articulation of figure of Black asexualities, writing that "although the growing field of asexuality has clarified and agential category of being that lacks sexual desire, it continues to not recognise earlier iterations of asexuality, persistent misrecognitions of the orientation, and the racialisation of its contemporary availability" (Owen, 2018, pg. 82). Owen's description of the racialization of sexuality as an agreed-upon misinterpretation of race and of sexuality – one which is known to be wrong, but is promised to be enforced by white supremacy – highlights the

construction of certain identity types as “hypersexual” or “nonsexual.” The contrast of the “Jezebel” figure and the ”Mammy” figure is used by Owen to describe these controlling images for Black women. In searching through the figure of the asexual Mammy in particular, Owen identifies defining aspects of recognition of difference and active non-disclosure which contain applicable resonances and perspectives on modern conceptions of asexuality. Other researchers, following Owen’s lead and interrogating other figures of Black asexuality, have furthered this development of “conscious Black asexuality” (e.g., Miles, 2019; Smith, 2020).

Gender is also a topic of identity analysis within asexuality and nonsexuality studies. Przybylo’s work on asexuality also includes analysis of asexual studies, and notes that early analysis of self-identified and self-reported asexuality - including the analysis of survey data by Bogaert (2004) - tended to naturalize assumptions of gender difference when considering the relationship between gender and sexual orientation. More specifically, researchers suggested a difference in the activity and awareness of men’s and women’s sexuality, describing men as seeking out sex and women as being more receptive in their sexuality. As Przybylo (2013) notes, this “suggests that women are in a sense incapable of being asexual,” and argues that “women are often not at all aware of their own sexual impulses, and thus might perceive themselves to be asexual” (236). In outlining these trends, Przybylo argues that these research trends articulate asexuality through flawed and harmful assumptions of gender difference. Alyson K. Spurgas’s work in *Diagnosing Desire* (2020) also suggests such a connection between gender and asexuality, writing on the history of medical interpretation of female sexuality and receptivity and finding a beneficial relationship between such work and asexuality studies, writing that “my data suggest that justice-seeking and radical care need not sexual domination and submission, and that parasexuality might inform and be informed by nuanced conceptions of asexuality

beyond normative discourses of sexual rights, health, intimacy, eroticism, and ability/capacity" (Spurgas, 2020, pg. 188)

The intersectional relationship between asexuality and disability has also been approached in research, most notably through the work of Eunjung Kim. In examining the connected histories of sex research and medicalization, Kim (2014) observes the existence of "a stigma of being labeled pathological that leads those in presumably non-disabled asexual positions to dissociate themselves from disorder, disease, and disability. Conversely, disabled people who are often considered asexual dissociate themselves from asexuality" (pg. 460). In observing this "mutual negation," Kim argues that an accounting of various types of non-sexuality, the use of nonsexuality in constructing disability, and the conscious distinction between "assumed asexuality" and asexual identity reveals a shared goal between disability and asexual communities in combatting such pathologizing.

As seen in the previous examples of intersectionality and social identity theory used as a lens for work on queer identity and asexuality, the narratives of social identity are of particular interest to this field of work. The relationship between representational images and identity verification highlights the role of media in providing examples and models of social identities, and the interpretations (and often misinterpretations) of asexuality in relation to identity categories such as race, gender, and disability suggests a complicated interplay between language, identity, and narrative within asexuality. To further understandings of asexuality as a social identity, it will therefore be useful to examine media narratives and images of asexuality and asexual people.

Asexual Media

Asexuality is still largely invisible in media, but there have been slight gains of visibility in recent years that are worthy of observation and analysis. The history of media representations of asexuality is a difficult one to articulate in all its complexity. What we may consider signs of asexuality – characters expressing a relative lack of interest in sex, prioritizing other aspects of their lives in ways that are commented on by the text, an apparent absence of sexuality or storylines of a character's sexual life in their characterization and depiction – are broad enough to be observed in a wide variety of media ranging hundreds of years. Questions of how these characteristics can be claimed as representations of asexuality as an identity or as a community, suggestions for the processes of this type of interpretive work, and the relevance of these portrayals on the crafting of asexual media theory is a very significant question within asexual communities and in academic asexual literature.

However, when it comes to the depiction of asexuality as a sexual orientation, and the instances in which we can view the asexual orientation as claimed and discussed in media, the range of depictions narrows significantly. It is a history that is largely contained to the 21st century, with mid-2010s television as the most significant individual point in the media history of such representation. In 2017, the GLAAD organization, in their efforts as a media watchdog to catalog instances of explicit LGBTQ+ representation in film and television, was able to count instances of asexual representation for the first time in the organization's history. These two instances were Todd Chavez of the adult animation Netflix show *BoJack Horseman*, and Raphael Santiago of the supernatural Freefom drama *Shadowhunters*. (GLAAD, 2017). During this time BoJack Horseman received some attention in press outlets because of the novelty of its asexual representation (Ghaleb 2018, Cuby, 2018). In subsequent years, GLAAD has counted several

additional shows featuring asexual characters: Freeform's *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, HBO Max's *genera+ion,* Syfy's *Chucky*, and Netflix's *Heartbreak High, Sex Education*, and *Big Mouth* (GLAAD 2022; GLAAD 2023).

Because the GLAAD survey only includes regular or recurring characters on television, and was not ongoing throughout the entirety of the 21st century, there are earlier instances of asexual characters on television before this moment in 2017. These instances of asexual representation are often brief, contained to minor characters or individual episodes of their shows, and are notable largely because of the otherwise barren representational landscape. However, these early or brief representations often contain evidence of tropes, storylines, and certain emphasized aspects of asexuality that continue in representation to this day.

In considering these themes more broadly, non-fictional figures play an important role in the representation of asexuality on television. These include many asexual individuals who appeared on talk shows and news programs centered on asexuality, most notably the asexual activist David Jay and his television appearances in the early 2000s. Jay is the creator of the online asexual community AVEN and was interviewed on talk shows such as *The View*. Cerankowski (2014) described appearances such as these as constructing a figure of the spectacular asexual, as hosts brought to the interviews their own perceptions of sexuality as a universal norm and an incredulous attitude towards the asexual figure as challenging those norms. As Cerankowski writes, "when people who identity as asexual are interviewed on television, their body and their subjectivity become objects of fixation for the interviewer and, as a consequence, for the viewing public… the fixation is placed on the body of the asexual to make that body into the same and the familiar" (pg. 147). The tension that the asexual figure brings to

these appearances characterizes much of the tension that narratives of asexuality appeared focused to resolve.

Many early representations of asexuality address this tension by depicting the perspective of asexual people on seemingly distant sexual aspects of culture. One early example is the character "Sebastian the Asexual Icon" from Craig Kilborn's iteration of *The Late Late Show*, whose lines include "I never saw the movie Ed Wood because the word "wood" makes me extremely uncomfortable" and "In my opinion, the most erotic film is *Tron*." The depiction of asexuality here is not meant to articulate a real orientation or collection of feelings that might describe a certain population of the public, but instead to highlight uses of sexual language and discussion of sexuality that the audience might consider normal or commonplace, but stands out as strange when removed from the context of sexual attraction. The example of Sebastian highlights how this theme is used to satirize sexuality through the lens of a hypothetical asexual person, but the theme is also used in this instance to explain the "strangeness" of a person not as concerned with sexuality as is considered normal.

Another example that fits into the theme of a is Voodoo, a hospital worker in the 2010s USA cable show *Sirens*. Like Sebastian, Voodoo enters the show aware and accepting of her self-identified status as "asexual," and like Sebastian, she displays a passionate interest in something other than sexuality that is meant to be off-putting and strange to audiences (in Voodoo's case, that interest is in death and the macabre). The characterization of asexuality in these instances is serves as an explanation for the character's absence from the attention-consuming processes of pursuing sexual relationships or participating in sexual culture, and an explanation for where that unspent energy and attention is refocused onto. Some later instances of asexuality do fulfill on the potential of this figure to comment on the strangeness of other expression of sexuality. The

character of Yolanda on *BoJack Horseman*, who is the asexual daughter in a family of erotic film stars, sex advice columnists, and lubricant manufacturers, and the segment of *Nathan For You* in which asexual workers are hired at a tech repair shop to ensure that customers can comfortably know that their private photos will not be inappropriately viewed by employees, both extend this contrast into outright farce.

Other representation shows a different path towards this explanatory purpose of using asexuality as a narrative bridge between a non-sexual strangeness in certain characters and the concept of asexuality. In many pieces of media, this tension may be observable to audiences but not addressed in the work itself, and in some instances, authorial figures of the work have since clarified their perceptions of the asexuality of the character in question. An instructive example of this comes from the video game *Borderlands 2*, in which some audience members noticed that the character of Maya did not engage in the sexual banter or discussion between characters that was otherwise very prevalent in the video game. After the game's release and in response to questions about this aspect of the character, the game's writer expressed that he considered the character to be asexual, and that this was the sub-text of the writing. Other high-profile examples of characters that authors describe as asexual outside of their central texts, include Alan in the film *The Hangover*, the supervillain Ozymandias in the film adaptation and television sequel of the graphic novel *Watchmen*, the cartoon spy Perry the Platypus in *Phineas and Ferb*, and some iterations of the superheroes Black Widow and The Wasp in the Marvel Comics universe. This pattern has much of the same explanatory purpose as the Sebastian and Voodoo examples, though with the key distinctions that the confirmation of asexuality comes outside of the text, and in some instances is resolved after the observation of a lack of sexuality in the character by audiences and fan interpretations of the characters as asexual.

Two notable exceptions that may still fall into this category are the ongoing Netflix show *Heartstopper* (which features a character that the show's creator has stated is intended to be perceived as asexual and will receive storylines about their asexuality in show's future) and the titular character in Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In SpongeBob's instance, there is an insistence of the show's creator that the character is asexual, but the context of this insistence is separate in ways that contain implications for the interpretation of SpongeBob as a queer character. The use of "asexual" was used in response to negative perceptions of homosexuality that some homophobic audience members and conservative groups had used to criticize. The description of SpongeBob as "asexual" was employed by the show's creator to defuse the controversy around a perception of queerness, and not an attempt to insert or clarify a queer identity of the character, which gives me pause on this specific instance. The re-articulation of SpongeBob as a queerly asexual figure has been adopted by some fans and referenced to by Nickelodeon, who have placed SpongeBob with the purple colors of the asexual pride flag in marketing materials around Pride Month in the past, so it is still certainly in this conversation of externally confirmed asexual characters.

Conversely, some authors respond to the notion of an asexual character by negating the possibility, often in concurrence with storylines in the text that clarify the character as explicitly non-asexual. The most prominent examples of this trope are Sheldon Cooper in the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and Sherlock Holmes in the BBC mystery adaptation *Sherlock*. Both exhibit a lack of interest in sexuality and a strange fascination with other aspects of life that would certainly prime them for an articulation of asexuality that describes their distance from other, non-asexual figures in their fictions. Sheldon Cooper's disinterest in sex is frequently commented on by the characters and by potential romantic interests in the show, and Sherlock's

dedication to crime and detective work is frequently shown as having a priority over sexual interests in his life. But, in both of these instances, the possibility of asexuality is largely denied as a legitimate reading of the texts by the show's producers. In *The Big Bang Theory*, this comes through the text, as Sheldon does engage in a heterosexual romantic partnership, resolve the tension of his non-sexuality, and as the prequel show Young Sheldon depicts the character as explicitly heterosexual. A similar storyline occurs in Sherlock, but this direction of interpretation is more forcefully communicated by the show's producer Steven Moffat, who clarified that "If he was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that" during an interview with *The Guardian* (Jeffries, 2012). In these instances, what could be considered an asexual resonance or possibility is shut down. These "eccentric genius" tropes represented by characters like Cooper and Holmes have been analyzed in academic research focused on disability representation and stereotypes (Matthews, 2019; Winston, 2014; Loftis, 2014). Many of these observations and studies on the stereotypes and narratives reified by these characters in the context of autism are also similar to their representation of asexual tropes. In their consideration of these characters as representing the characters of "nerd" and "detective" respectively, Matthew notes the continuation of autism representation as primarily white and male, and Loftis argues that depictions of detectives like Holmes contribute to stereotypes of cognitive disabilities by mitigating the threat to "normalcy" that such figures can present. These trends of reinforcement of "normalcy" and a lack of intersectional diversity can also be seen in asexual contexts Research into the intersection between disability and asexuality has explored these similarities in media narratives. Lund and Johnson (2014) in their description of asexuality and disability as "Strange But Compatible Bedfellows," discuss the beliefs and assumptions of asexuality and disability that lead to such narratives and provide avenues of narrative analysis. They write,

"People with disabilities are 'othered' – a sexuality that would be viewed skeptically in an able-bodied or 'norma' person is assumed as a default or likelihood among people with disabilities. This may imply that people with disabilities exist separate from the typical conceptualizations of humanity and human normalcy" (129). This type of "skepticism" can frame the representation of both asexuality and disability in media, as the deviations from the norm may need to be explicitly defined or made clear to audiences to address the separation from "human normalcy." The "eccentric genius" provides this explanation for Sheldon Cooper and Sherlock Holmes, and for Holmes, "asexuality" as an explanation is explicitly denied by the creators. This trope provides a suggestion for analysis of media representations of both identity categories – the degree to which a separation from humanity is assumed and the tropes or narrative devices used to justify such a separation.

Another common theme in depictions of asexuality is the narrative of an asexual person discovering what asexuality is and coming to identify with asexuality as an identity and as an orientation. Liv, a character in the British soap opera *Emmerdale* introduced in 2016 highlights the outline of this type of story: confronted by another character with their appearance of a lack of sexuality, the character attempts to prove that they are "normal" by pursuing sexual relationships. When this ends up leading to unsatisfying results that don't feel true to the character, they learn about asexuality (often along with an explainer for the audience) and embrace asexuality as an aspect of their identity. These aspects of her character are meant to convey her strangeness, but instead of a strangeness already accepted to the character and introduced to the audience, the recognition of the strangeness, its articulation into an identity category, and the embrace and expression of that identity category is all conveyed to the character and to the audience at the same time.

This type of storyline describes much of the most prominent representations of asexuality in the 2010s. The previously mentioned example of Todd from the Netflix series *BoJack Horseman* follows this storyline precisely, with Todd's articulation of "I'm not gay, but I don't think I'm straight either. I think I might be nothing" being an excellent distillation of the storyline. Florence, a recurring character on Netlfix's *Sex Education*, eventually confides to the show's sex counselor character that she doesn't want to have sex ever and that "she might be broken," to which the counselor character responds "sex does not make us whole, so how could you be broken?" after explaining asexuality to the character. Elijah, in a 2022 episode of the adult animation *Big Mouth*, attempts to overcome a disinterest in sex to kiss his girlfriend, and when this doesn't work for the character, confides in his mother, who reveals to Elijah that she is asexual and suggests that he may be as well. With over 20 million views, the most-watched YouTube video on asexuality also falls neatly into this category, though it is a non-fictional example: the animated personal essay "Being Not Straight" by JaidenAnimations.

As a narrative of queer identity, this type of storyline is the most similar to those found in other representations of LGBTQ+ people in television. Tropiano (2002) describes four plots of gay TV. Two of them, the "mistaken identity" and the "faking it" storylines, don't have much in the way of parallels to television asexuality. However, the other two "coming out of the closet" and "the special episode," see their traces in these Revelation storylines. The "outing" of an asexual person is not typically the focus of these stories, but is instead a part of this process of self-discovery. An example – once Todd from BoJack Horseman accepts his own asexuality, he does then have many individual "coming out" scenes with other characters from the show. This process often has the same educational focus of the asexual individual teaching others about asexuality, and so is often quite different in tone. When Todd tells BoJack that he is asexual in

BoJack Horseman, the response of BoJack isn't the type of "I knew that's what you were!" response described by Russo (1987) as being common for gay characters leaving the celluloid closet. Nor does it contain even the barest similarity of recognition of identity, as BoJack instead responds with "a sexual what? Deviant?" But, because of the shift in character that these revelation storylines often imply for their long-running shows, and the presence of disclosure of sexual identity to other characters and to the audience, that connection to other forms of queer television is still significant.

The last type of major representation that I would consider an essential theme of the representation of asexuality in television and in media is as a unique narrative element to contribute to broader narratives or story interests about human relationships and romance. These representations take a common question of asexual difference and tension and finds ways to resolve that tension through narrative, the question in this instance being "if you're not interested in sex, how do you have relationships?" Many instances of asexual representation are interested in diving into this question, either from the perspective of a non-asexual person who might encounter asexuality in their own romantic efforts, or from an asexual person testing their own boundaries of connection and of fulfillment and desire. Many of the characters previously described do eventually continue their stories of asexuality by providing examples of asexual dating and outlining the challenges and problem-solving of asexual individuals and their asexual or non-asexual partners. The negotiations of relationship boundaries becomes an important aspect of Liv's storyline in *Emmerdale*, and Todd gets involved with two romantic partners in later seasons of *BoJack Horseman*, one of which ends as they discover a lack of similarities outside of their asexuality, and the other of which begins after Todd's creation of an asexual dating app. When considering the relationship of non-asexual to potential asexual partners,

Voodoo from *Sirens* has much of the storyline of her character as it relates to asexuality tied up in the unsuccessful efforts of a smitten colleague to pursue a relationship. In this instance, asexuality is presented as a unique or unusual aspect in a storyline unrequited love or unwanted advances. This type of storyline also describes the character of Raphael in *Shadowhunters* mentioned earlier, whose asexuality is only mentioned twice in the show, first as a potential obstacle in his relationship with another character, and then once again during a break-up scene where Raphael's partner insists that his asexuality is not one of their irreconcilable issues.

A more supernatural take on this type of wrinkle can be found in the sci-fi show *Imperfects*, where the asexual character of Abbi develops an ironic superpower and finds that others are irresistibly attracted to and easily persuaded by her. Asexuality as it appears in romance and literature often follows this example, with the writing of Alice Osman and Claire Kann consistently providing examples of asexual characters navigating an internal question of identity alongside the potential of romantic connection and/or self-fulfillment. The two most prominent depictions of asexuality in video games also follow this pattern. Both *The Outer Worlds* and *Hades* have systems where the player can pursue romantic relationships with others or assist in the facilitation of a romantic relationship between other characters. In *The Outer World*s, one of these characters is asexual, and the player's storyline with the character helping them express their romantic interest to another character, and in *Hades*, after pursuing a romantic relationship the character Dusa, the storyline ends with Dusa revealing that she does not want "that type of" relationship with the player's character. These storylines are placed alongside other episodic stories in the game that involve a variety of romantic situations, dilemmas, or possibilities, and asexuality is presented again as a unique twist to this type of story.

I've described so far examples and themes that cover much of the significant representation of asexuality in media, with two notable exceptions. The most prominent example of the most negative and delegitimizing depiction of asexuality in media is that which is found in the television show *House*. In one episode, a minor side-story finds the central investigative doctor addressing an asexual couple. Dr. House's immediate insistence is that asexuality isn't real, and the events of the episode serve to prove him right. One of the members of the asexual couple is revealed to be faking their asexuality to be with their asexual partner, and the asexuality of that second partner is revealed to be caused by a brain tumor. A similar storyline can be found with the character Seligman in the 2013 film *Nymphomaniac*, who claims that he is asexual throughout the film before attempting to sexually assault the main character at the film's conclusion. No other examples of asexual representation go this far into outright denying the existence of asexuality and suggesting that asexual individuals are either faking their orientation or medically unwell. These representations are significant as an outlier example of this type of hostility towards the identity category and self-expressed sexual orientation of asexuality – though, again, a more interpretive archival effort on the representation and depiction of asexuality would likely find a hostile history of dismissal, ostracization, delegitimization, and medical intervention when considering the concept of a conspicuous lack of sexuality more broadly. Additionally, the type of hostility and "aphobia" depicted in the *House* episode describes and characterizes some discourse and discussion of asexuality more common on digital platforms. This *House* episode in specific has been a topic of criticism regarding its depiction of asexuality since its airing in 2012, criticized as "letting down" the ace community through its depiction of asexuality as fake in *The Mary Sue* (Hale-Tern, 2020), referred to the "Dreaded

House Episode" in the asexual podcast *The Ace Couple* (The Ace Couple, 2022), and described at the time as "disturbing but not unexpected" by AVEN founder David Jay (Clark-Flory, 2012).

Social media sites dedicated to asexuality often contain a lot of content of asexual individuals finding this attitude in their regular lives and using asexual online spaces to vent, and views that express this belief in the inherent illegitimacy of asexuality can be found online as well. A recent video by anti-queer far-right Daily Wire correspondent Matt Walsh (2023) on asexuality concludes in the same way as the House episode, with Matt recommending that asexual people either stop "making up" asexuality or seek medical help for their lack of sexuality.

What these exceptions do highlight, however, is that the media representation of asexuality is largely validating of the expression as a legitimate sexual orientation, and shows like *Sirens, Emmerdale, BoJack Horseman, Sex Education*, and *Big Mouth* have likely introduced the concept of asexuality to many viewers – ones who are not asexual, and ones who may relate to the concept and identify with. For these types of representations, it is encouraging to see that more have been established in the past decade, as it contributes to an important effort of expanding the visibility and education of asexuality as a concept.

There is also an encouraging racial diversity in the representations of asexuality, especially depictions from the 2010s and more recently. While many of the characters listed above are White, including most examples of 2000s asexual representation such as Liv from *Emmerdale* and Voodoo from *Sirens*, the more recent examples of non-white actors playing non-White asexual characters include prominent instances of asexual representation including Brian Tyree Henry in *Big Mouth*, Natalie Morales in *BoJack Horseman*, and David Castro in *Shadowhunters,* among others. In terms of gender, there are many examples of cis men and cis

women in these asexual characters, though there are much fewer trans/non-binary asexual characters. The fairie Jae from Peacock's *Supernatural Academy* stands out as an example, especially as they are played by trans/non-binary actor Ali J. Eisner.

Disabled asexual characters are also not present in these examples of television, digital, and video game content, although there have been some representations of disabled asexual characters in literature. Asexual characters of lower economic class are also not present in these examples. Parvati in the science-fiction video game *The Outer Worlds* stands out as an exception, even in a science-fiction fantasy setting, as her storyline involves her profession as a mechanic and her family's struggle with overwork.. Todd Chavez in *BoJack Horseman* similarly embodies an almost fantastical image of class, existing in the show as a drifter taking odd jobs and living rent-free in the house of celebrities while not being financially stable himself.

The issue that remains with these representations, though, is that even when they are positive, they are largely centered towards those two audiences – non-asexuals and those being introduced to the concept of asexuality. The aspects of discovery and identification with asexuality in these storylines may be similar to the experiences of asexual audiences, but they also involve descriptions and explanations of the orientation that are repetitive to those already aware of the concept. The question of "what do you do if not sex?" that drives the depictions of asexual perspectives is a question about an external figure of asexuality of little use to those embodying that figure. And while the question of "what are unique aspects of asexual relationships" can be useful to asexual individuals seeking relationships, in their presentations they are often depicted as twists on the idea of normative romantic and sexual relationships for audiences invested in those types of relationships, which includes some (but only some) asexual audiences. Much of this does make sense because of asexuality's invisibility – the tax of

representation being explanations that are relevant to a non-asexual audience. But it is certainly a limitation of current asexual representation that is as troubling as this invisibility.

Asexual Media Studies

Just as there is little media representation of asexuality, there is also little research work charting and analyzing asexuality in media. When it comes to the relationship between media and asexuality, the work that has most expressively navigated this space and interrogated figures of asexuality has not been work that reacts to depictions of asexuality, but rather work that seeks asexuality in existing queer, feminist, and sexual discourses and representations. For these purposes, the writing of Przybylo and the articulation of asexual resonances (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014) and asexual erotics (Przybylo, 2019) are key works. Pryzbylo articulates a need here for asexual theorists and researchers to engage with the concept of the archive, and search not just for those explicit evocations of asexuality as an identity, but for any connection of "resonance" where a lack of sexuality could be articulated, and articulated as a relation to asexual identity.

The most significant difference between studies on asexual narratives and the representation of asexuality in media is, largely, the distinction between nonsexuality and the asexual orientation. One of the media examples explored by Pryzbylo is the concept of "lesbian crib death" in the film *The Kids Are All Right*. In analyzing the film's perception in lesbian discourse, the sexual desire and behavior suggested by the concept, and the depiction of asexual possibilities by the film, this type of approach describes much of the narratives of nonsexuality that researchers have used to expand the concept of asexuality past the "lack of sexual attraction" definition of the asexual orientation.

One of the most significant contributions of this archive inquiry and historical revisiting is the conception of asexuality as a pathology and as a controlling image. The work of Spurgas (2020) on medical approaches to sexuality and sexual disorders over the course of history, centered on the experiences of women experiencing sexual pain, is not about the same type of self-expressed, self-identified asexuality defined in BoJack Horseman or Big Mouth. But the discourses of sexual normalcy and the rigid enforcement of boundaries that make asexuality an invisibility are also those that pathologize and demand medical intervention for variances in sexual experiences and that construct the disabled body, and the pursuit of sexual freedom and the experiences in relation to heteronormative discourse makes bedfellows of all involved. Owen, in his work on the figure of the Black "mammy" (Owen 2018) and of the enforcement of the asexual image as a way to combat the perceived threat of Black sexuality to whiteness, describes a similar need for asexuality to incorporate those that are made asexual as essential themselves to the making of asexuality. This type of investigation into narratives of asexuality are the most common type of media research into asexuality, with recent examples including investigations into the asexual resonances of Harlem renaissance writing which had once been interpreted as gay (Smith 2020) and the use of asexuality as a lens for investigations into an unidentified "strangeness" of a character in the fantasy video game Dragon Age (Brown and Partridge, 2021).

This type of "media representation of asexuality" – the return to the archives and the search for nonsexuality and asexual resonances – would be difficult to articulate in media representation. The construction of asexuality in these instances often an articulation of asexuality created between the research interpretation and the text itself, whereas the research of

asexual characters and asexual orientations in media necessarily relies on the type of self-identified asexual identity that this research aims to expand.

As much as research into the representation of asexual characters would be a benefit into this literature on asexuality, the contributions of queer scholarship into the expansion of asexuality as a definition, the construction of asexuality in history, and the use of archival resonances would be a benefit to modern efforts to collect and establish a history of asexual characters in media. These efforts, as they currently exist, do rely on the same type of self-identified articulation of asexual identity that has driven survey research and analysis of the asexual community, and that this strand of research onto media narratives, the construction of sexuality, and the politics of sexual and asexual choice have problematized.

Digital Media

Existing media representation of asexuality in media such as television shows us examples of certain narratives and themes of asexual social identity. However, because much of this representation involves explaining the basics of asexuality to presumably non-asexual audiences, other forms of media expression and representation may provide better insight into asexual social identity as negotiated and expressed by asexual people. For this reason, it will be useful to focus the present study on digital media and its unique history of facilitating self-image construction, social identity, and expression.

The term “digital media” can broadly be defined as any media which interacts with or is consumed using digital devices such as smart phones or laptop computers, in comparison to analog media. However, research exploring the effects and influences of digital media often uses the term to highlight a more specific trend, pattern, or distinction within that broader category of

media on digital devices. One common use of the term is to describe online and social media and how the internet broadly distributes content as a platform as opposed to as a traditional publisher or publishing channel. Tim O'Reilly's influential article "What is Web 2.0" (2005) highlights this as a key element of the internet's use and function following the 2001 dot-com crash, describing an "architecture of participation" both in the ability of users to create content, and through the rise of services such as blogs and wikis which are reliant on such user content. Other researchers reflecting on the transition from "Web 1.0" to "Web 2.0" have critiqued somewhat the implication that technological or business practices of online companies truly necessitated the "2.0" moniker but do note the change in approaches and trends towards the internet as something akin to "rhetorical technology" and "a shift to make clear that the internet was a platform" (Allen, 2012, pg. 264).

This definition of digital media relies heavily on the internet as a core feature, and other researchers have emphasized how digital media facilitates a convergence between a variety of media forms and its relation to the term "multimedia." Martin and Betrus' (2019) explainer of digital media for the purposes of education and learning is an example of this definition, as multimedia and digital media are used interchangeably to refer to "digitized content that includes a variety of the media elements such as text, images, audio, video, animation" (pg. 3). This definition can also be seen in the description of "convergence culture," coined by Henry Jenkins (2006) as a lens through which to view the possibilities and realities of changing technologies and practices in culture and media. For Jenkins, convergence refers to both the "top-down corporate-driven process" of media conglomeration and ownership concentration, and a "bottom-up consumer-driven process" of newly active media users adapting to and increasingly using digital technologies (pg. 18). It is for this reason that Jenkins describes "participatory culture"

and “convergence culture” as related concepts, but distinct in important ways. As it relates to the new abilities and technologies available to media consumers, convergence culture does indeed foster a desire for increased participation in media users and allow for tools through which audiences can become more active in their media use. However, as it relates to corporate consolidation of media companies, convergence culture can also contribute to a greater power of institutions and organizations to enforce certain restrictions on the speech and activity of media users. Under this perception of digital media and the environment it produces, “participation” is not a foundational reality available to all digital media users, but rather a foundational struggle between users and media organizations over how and when that participation can occur.

Other elaborations on digital media emphasize the generational shift represented by digital media in terms of its information-sharing capabilities and the effects on those raised in an environment of digital technology, especially compared to those from the immediate predecessor generation defined through its connection with television. Like the “multimedia” definition of digital media, this description of “digital generations” and their “digital environments” are broad in their conceptualization of which technologies and tools the term describes. What is specified as most important about digital media for these purposes are the distinctions in habits and behaviors. For example, Bockowski and Mitchelstein (2021) in their description of “The Digital Environment” defines digital media broadly as the ongoing evolution of “many-to-many communication” mixed into traditional forms of one-to-one and one-to-many communications, facilitated by the creation of “alternative multimedia systems” from the 1950s to the early 21st century (pg. 5). This broad technological definition is then narrowed by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein’s definition of the digital environment through “totality, duality, conflict, and indeterminacy” (pg. 6) – words describing the experiences had by users of digital media

interacting with this large, interconnected web of digital technologies and devices. This approach toward digital media can also be seen in Kember and Zylinska's (2012) argument in favor of moving past definitions of "new media" where they emphasize that "media cannot be conceived as anything else than hybrids, and technology is part of that hybridity" (pg. 7). This hybridity does not just refer to multimedia, but also the hybridity of user and technology through media – a process that is "all-encompassing and indivisible. This is why 'we' have never been separate from mediation" (pg. xv).

As definitions of digital media tend to revolve around convergence and interaction as core features, it is best to conceptualize digital media not in terms of the technology associated with the internet or digital devices, but in terms of what kinds of hybridity certain media technologies and environments facilitate and/or encourage. The presence of hybridity between user and technology cannot by itself define digital media; as Kember and Zylinska (2012) warn, all media can be defined by such hybridity. Searching for a definition of digital media specifically requires an examination of how the processes, results, and technologies of hybridity are distinct between various types of media.

A significant intersection between social identity and digital media is social media, and identifying major trends and definitions on social media research may provide useful information about the overlap between these concepts. In their literature review identifying dominant definitions of social media, Aichner et al. (2021) identified early definitions of related terms such as "computer-supported social networks," "virtual communities," and "social networks," which they trace to modern understandings of social media. Shared between these definitions is this central comparison: just as computer networks facilitate interaction and connection between machines, social networks facilitate interaction and connection between users or groups. As

Aichner et al. note, “the role of SM, as an enabler for human interaction as well as an avenue to connect with other users, has been a constant in defining SM” (pg. 220).

In terms of consistent evolutions of the term, they highlight the recent emphasis on user-generated content as a signature feature alongside the facilitation of communication. These evolutions, as observed by Aichner et al.’s review, occurred around 2010, reflect a shift in research from the use of Internet technologies to socialize to the use of the Internet to collect and share information. This can be seen in the classification of social media provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), which defines two dimensions of social media: social presence and self-presentation. In this categorization, social presence refers to the amount of contact possible between two users and the degree to which the communication is intimacy and immediate, and self-presentation refers to the desire and ability of users to create a desirable image of themselves to display in communication. Using these dimensions, Kaplan and Haenlein give a classification of social media. In this classification, virtual worlds are considered to be the media with the highest degree of social presence, as they involve the interaction of stand-in avatars to facilitate communication between users. The second dimension of self-presentation in virtual worlds therefore reflects whether or not the social world encourages users to replicate real-world behavior and presentation. Kaplan and Haenlein identify the video games Second Life, in which players interact with each other in neighborhoods and environments replicating real life, and World of Warcraft, in which players take on the role of a fantasy character on a fictional planet, as reflective of this split in the expectations of self-disclosure within the medium of virtual worlds. In the categorizing process, Kaplan and Haenlein emphasize that social media with a lower degree of self-presentation instead emphasize content creation by media users. YouTube is directly compared to Facebook in this definition, both as allowing for medium levels of social

presence. Facebook contains more opportunities and expectations for the social presence to reflect real-world identity through the creation of personal profiles and more direct lines of communications between users. YouTube does not contain as many of these options or expectations for self-presentation, but this is because the primary service offered by the platform of YouTube is not social engagement but the creation and sharing of media content.

This definition of social media, relying on dimensions of self-expression and social presence, come from an industry-focused perspective, where social media is viewed for the purposes of identifying target audiences and their corresponding platforms, and evaluating certain platforms as potential targets for advertising or public relations messaging.. Ouirdi et al. (2014) in their content analysis of social media definitions in research articles from a variety of fields (namely business, politics, health, and education) find that broadly, the focus on user generated content and the social interaction between users facilitated through digital channels is a common aspect of social media definitions. The analysis of literature studied by Aichner et al. and Ouirdi et al. both highlight potential gaps in their consideration of the definition of social media, notably the centrality of the United States in research definitions and the difficulty of including a conceptualization of social media effects within a concise definition.

Social media, when defined as the use of digital technologies and channels for social interaction through self-expression and user-created content, places this type of media at a direct intersection between social identity and digital media. Much of what is described by the term "social media" is directly connected to the digital media concept of "Web 2.0" with the emphasis on interaction, participation, and the Internet as a platform. The use of this platform to share content and information and to engage in self-presentation gives internet users the ability to make relevant comparisons between themselves and others. To continue identifying this point of

intersection between social identity and digital media, the process of digital identification and the in-group/out-group dynamics it facilitates is another key concept.

Because of the social affordances offered by social media and digital technologies, and the ability of users to engage in self-presentation, it is useful to adopt a social identity theory lens when considering the possibilities of identity construction through these media. In applying theories of identity development and group conflict to social media platforms, Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle (2022) suggest that social media acts as a confluence for many difference types of people, and therefore a space where group identity can develop through the discovery of connection, through shared experiences or intolerances, and through the reaction to large political or social events.

Examples used by Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle (2022) include the use of social media as a tool to facilitate offline protests and interaction in specific locations, hashtag campaigns and counter-campaigns which stem from group identity, and opinion-based online interactions that themselves create relevant identity markers for individuals to express their identity or infer the identity of others. Through the lens of social identity theory, these spaces are used by individuals to conduct a number of social identity forming activities: expressing similarities between themselves and others in their social group, identifying the unique needs of this social group, establishing a positive ingroup impression, combatting negative outgroup impressions, and facilitating ingroup/outgroup comparison. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo hashtags allowed for users to engage in this group formation, serving as a connection point between Black people and women with shared experiences and establishing freedom from abuse from White people and men as a relevant need for these social groups. Meanwhile, for the counter-campaigns of #AllLivesMatter and #NotAllMen served the purposes of negating these

expressions of group identity.These hashtag campaigns can then also serve as nexus points for group identity if they are used to inspire or organize offline behaviors such as protests and counter-protests, or serve as a talking point in the creation of opinion-based group identities (e.g., the expression of opinion online about the "#BlackLivesMatter" and "#AllLivesMatter" campaigns can itself be established as a relevant marker of identity). Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle (2022) also address the affordances of social media technologies in the management of social communities. These include community building, the use of online tools in information-sharing within a community, the establishment of central shared narratives, and the creation of spaces for shared emotional expression. In these ways, "digital identity" can be conceptualized as the aspects of social identity that originate, develop, or are otherwise expressed using these opportunities and affordances of digital media.

Other research has explored the online infrastructure of social media platforms, and the contributing factors to the development of social identity and online behavior. In her analysis of online aggression, Sparby (2017) describes the specific design of the anonymous social media site 4chan and its notably aggressive "/b/" imageboard and analyzes the effect of this design on the collective identity of the site's users, its political content, and its effect on user behavior. This analysis considers not only the use of digital technologies and social media platforms, but also their construction and encouraged behaviors outside of socialization. As Sparby writes, "Traditionally privileged people also maintain their social advantage in digital spaces... Thus, an interface's collective identity will likely be controlled by dominant groups, giving voice only to those who already have it while continuing to silence others" (pg. 88). For 4chan and the /b/ board, she highlights several elements of the site's design that points to this control by dominant groups and their influence on the site's content and shared understandings of identity. These

include the site's lack of user profiles, a short list of site rules, the limited and volunteer moderation staff, and the lack of an archiving system for previous content or inactive conversation threads. From these interface descriptions, Spurby identifies two themes of the collective identity of 4chan: a lawlessness brought about by the simplicity of the rules and their lack of enforcement, and an unaccountability brough about by the forced anonymity and the routine erasure of previous statements.

Additionally, the conditions through which digital self-expression is encouraged or made more likely have also been evaluated by researchers. Through survey results, Papaioannou, Tsohou, and Karyda (2021) identified name, gender, picture, interests, and job, as "pillar information" in the process of shaping digital identity, and noted that users did not have general concerns about information privacy that affect self-expression or disclosure of personal information through digital media. Adjei et al. (2020), focusing on types of information, identified certain aspects of personal identity that survey respondents were more willing to disclose on social media such as name, gender, religion, and educational history. Types of information that respondents were more unwilling to disclose included medical history, information about a partner, and political views. These researchers also identified certain contexts or factors that led to changes in disclosure willingness, such as whether the social media account was anonymized, or heightened concerns about privacy for certain social media sites seen as less trustworthy.

The affordances of digital media make possible the identity-forming processes of social identity, occurring through the use of social media and the process of creating digital identity. In these processes, social media refers to the online and digital spaces through which users are able to present themselves as social beings and interact with the social presence of others, creating

relationships between others, identifying differences and similarities, and forming a conscious group identity. Digital identity then refers to that social presence itself, and how it is considered both as a digital representation of a specific identity or social position, and as a social identity itself that is affected and influenced by the social dynamics of the digital spaces it inhabits.

"Sounds Fake But Okay"

In searching for media that allows for the depiction and discussion of asexuality and social identity through digital media, asexual podcasting lends itself to the present study. One notable example of asexual media that has gained prominence in recent years is the hour-long conversation and interview podcast *Sounds Fake From Okay*, created and hosted by Kayla Kaszyca and Sarah Costello. The podcast, created in 2017, exists alongside several other asexuality-focused podcasts that were developed and produced by asexual people in the late 2010s, such as the representation and fandom podcast *Aceterprtations*, the advice podcast *Aced It!*, and the interview podcast *A OK*. Writing about the rise of asexual podcasts for Them, Michelle Hyun Kim (2020) described these podcasts as "crucial educational tools and beacons of representation – especially within a world where mainstream ace representation barely extends beyond *BoJack Horseman* and *Sex Education*." Since Kim's piece, several of the podcasts mentioned have ended or stopped production, while *Sounds Fake But Okay* has continued to increase in popularity and visibility, publishing 299 total episodes as of April 2024, with its hosts being interviewed in pieces on asexuality in *Cosmopolitan* and *Slate* (Chung 2021, MacMillen et al. 2021) and acquiring a publishing deal for a book about asexuality..

In 2021, the podcast was also the center of a controversy when prominent asexual model and activist Yasmin Benoit described her experience being interviewed on the podcast in 2020 and said the hosts "have enacted harmful racist behaviours towards me multiple times" (Benoit

2021). These increases in prominence and the most recent controversy, as well as its conversational nature and the format of the show in which each episode typically includes a discussion of a wide variety of topics approached from the asexual lens of its hosts (recent examples include Christmas songs, vampires, and mind games in relationships), point to the show as a space in both the asexual hosts and their audience are engaging in negotiations about the meaning of asexuality and its applications to various aspects of the lives of asexual people. As Costello and Kaszyca are both able-bodied college-educated White cis women, the degree to which their content discusses or references a relationship to intersectional identity categories of race, gender, class, and disability will be noteworthy in the podcast content.

This discussion also extends to the show's social media platforms, as audiences engage with the material on social media, continuing and responding to these discussions - sometimes giving significant rebuttals to the presentation of asexuality the podcast presents, as was the case with Yasmin Benoit's criticism towards the show and its hosts. As this is a consideration largely missing from asexuality research, an investigation into these negotiations and their implications will contribute greatly towards beginning to understand asexuality as a social identity inhabited and claimed by asexual people. This relevance of the social media content in contributing to the podcast content itself is strongest in the podcast's use of Discord. The podcasts hosts and audience members post to this site multiple times a day, as opposed to the podcast's Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Tumblr profiles, which are uploaded far less frequently. The Discord site is also frequently referenced by the hosts in the podcast, serves as the source of inspiration for several episode topics, and is the main connection point to "our community of listeners" promoted on the website for *Sounds Fake But Okay*

For this Research

Because *Sounds Fake But Okay* offers a space in its show and surrounding social media platforms for discussions on the concept of asexuality, the lives of asexual people, and the meaning of asexuality in a variety of aspects of life, it offers the opportunity for navigating and defining asexuality as a social identity. Other research trends in asexuality studies and asexual narratives in media center the core definition of asexuality and its relationship to sexual attraction, sexual activities, and sexualized bodies. Although these have proved valuable in establishing this core definition of asexuality, turning to media created about asexuality by asexual people and for an audience that presumably does understand this core definition may allow for other relevant meanings, experiences, and interpretations of asexuality. In searching for asexuality as a social identity, this type of media may also give examples of in-group and out-group distinctions, images of asexual verification or non-verification, positional contexts of asexuality, and intersectional relationships between other identity categories.

Chapter 3: Methods

In this chapter, the textual analysis methodology of this study will be described and its relevance to the present study will be established. Following this description, the data collection process will be outlined, including the selection criteria for episodes of *Sounds Fake But Okay* that were analyzed, the coding procedure for podcast transcripts, and the data collection and coding procedures which were used to answer the RQs.

Textual Analysis

This study conducted a textual analysis of podcast content from *Sounds Fake But Okay*, along with the social media posts from the conversation threads of the show's official Discord server that relate to the content of the podcast. The *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast was selected

as it is the most prominent podcast centered on asexuality (Kim 2020) and the social media platform chosen were those that the podcast uses regularly for promotion and interaction with fans. Additionally, the podcast has been consistently airing since July 2017 and has produced over 200 episodes, meaning that introductory topics such as the definition of asexuality or explanations of terms related to asexuality for its audience had already been covered by the earlier episodes of the podcast and are less common in more recent episodes and discussions. As a social media site, Discord is separated into different communities surrounding various interests, like the separation of the website Reddit into various "sub-Reddit" internet communities. These communities, or "servers," act as hubs for various conversation threads and different pages of comments. Servers can be public or private, with the *Sounds Fake But Okay* server being a publicly available source of conversation and community about the podcast and asexuality which is promoted by the podcast website and in the podcast content itself. This Discord content is publicly available content and posts visible to anyone with a free account to the website.

Textual analysis has been used as a method of qualitatively analyzing podcasts for their themes, meanings, and the construction of the relationship between podcast hosts and audiences (e.g., Moraga 2018, Boling et al 2019). As such, this method was most appropriate for the purposes of identifying the qualitative data and the meanings and narratives of asexuality for this study. When it comes to the study of asexuality in the media, the benefits of a qualitative approach are apparent. Asexual people are a significant minority in the population and the representation of asexuality in media is similarly sparse. The textual analysis of social media content surrounding the podcasts extends the scope of the analysis of the podcast content, as how the podcast episodes are discussed and how identities are negotiated by audiences will add rich detail and dynamics to the data. Because of this invisibility, research methods which gain richer

data from smaller amounts of individuals, texts, or other data points have a natural advantage in this situation where these populations are already smaller.

The methodology of this textual analysis follows guidelines from Fürsich (2009) and Matheson (2005), both of whom outline the benefits of textual analysis in uncovering the connection between language, context, ideology, and identity within text. Fürsich (2009) in particular highlights texts as existing in the middle of the process of message encoding and decoding, an active location of meaning-making that is especially beneficial to consider for asexual media. The invisibility of asexuality creates a need for the asexual community to develop a language and a discourse of its own in the creation of community and connections between asexual individuals. For example, one of the consequences of the development of asexual activist groups and communities being primarily online is that the memetic culture of symbols and meanings is distinct in many forms and the creation of language for particular identity purposes. Language is playfully manipulated in many of these contexts, such the podcast title *Sounds Fake But Okay* repurposing a common insulting phrase often used to discredit asexuality as an orientation. This creativity and the need to create a language of connection and understanding out of a culturally invisible experience of sexuality also finds its way into the research of asexual people and their relationships to romantic partners and sexual activity, where respondents often articulate the way they've needed to use a similarity to navigate and describe a broad variety of relationships, attitudes, and activities. Matheson (2005) additionally suggests the use of textual analysis to develop understandings of identity as constructed by a speaker, the internal semiotic logics and relationships of language, and the construction of cohesion and cause-and-effect relationships in the creation of narratives and conversation. These areas, which are fruitful for qualitative methodology and textual analysis, provide guiding points for the analysis and

interpretation of content within the *Sounds Fake But Okay* media content and virtual community. Through these perspectives, an understanding of how the language and narrative development found in asexual media spaces constructs asexual social identity.

Sampling and Coding Procedures

The time frame covered in this analysis consisted of six months of podcast content, between December 2022 to May 2023. This covered 23 episodes of the podcast, from episode 240 to episode 261. Centering the analysis on more recent episodes in the show's five-year run will likely mean that the show's content focused less on defining or explaining asexuality and its related terms for its audience, and more on exploring less defined aspects of asexuality or suggesting relationships between asexuality and other ideas or cultural elements.

The podcast content was analyzed to answer RQs 1, 2, and 3 and was coded in two rounds, following procedures from Saldaña (2016). Concept coding was utilized for the first round of coding, as it is recommended by Saldaña for research aimed at process codes and themes with an eye towards larger ideas, and where "the codes become prompts or triggers for critical thought and writing" (pg. 123). The podcast transcripts accessible through the website of *Sounds Fake But Okay* were used for analysis. The second round of coding consisted of focused coding, described by Saldaña (2016) as the development of "the most salient categories" (pg. 240) from the analysis of thematically similar and significant codes developed from the first round.

Following the coding of the podcast content, social media posts were analyzed and coded in similar ways to enrichen the podcast content related to RQs 1 and 3 and answer RQ2. This coding also utilized a first round of concept coding and second round of focused coding. The

data from these posts, including the username, text content / caption, image / video content, and time of posting, was downloaded and analyzed. The Discord server for *Sounds Fake But Okay* contains three relevant discussion threads: “podcast-talk” in which the podcast content is discussed, “pod-ideas” in which users and audience members suggest topics for the podcast, and “aspec” in which asexuality and its related identities are discussed more generally. Podcast transcripts and social media comments and threads were analyzed using Microsoft Word and Excel.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the four significant themes from the textual analysis of the *Sounds Fake But Okay* social media and podcast content will be explored. The four themes of *Realization of Asexual Identity*, *Asexuality as "Missing Sexuality," Asexuality as a Distinct Perspective,* and *Navigating Intersectional Groups of Asexuality* will be described and supported through examples from *Sounds Fake But Okay*, related social media posts, and relevant insights from outside research. These themes describe the overlapping tools and tropes commonly and meaningfully used in describing the unique social identity location of asexuality, as described and performed by the podcast hosts and social media members.

Realization of Asexual Identity

> Kaszyca: I love just, like, asking our guests this in general, just to, like, get, kind of, like, their aspec background. But when did you, kind of, like, discover your asexuality or start thinking about it? How did you come to that realization? (*Ep. 240*)

Sounds Fake But Okay host Kayla Kaszyca frames this question to YouTuber Evie Lupine as a general table-setting introduction to the relationship between any asexual individual and their asexuality. It is used in these instances to provide the guests with opportunities to tell their own story of their sexual identity, outlining the logics and experiences that led them from who they used to be to who they are now. More importantly, these questions require the creation of narratives and languages of asexuality that help provide the meaning of asexuality to each individual. Through telling these stories, individuals perform their identity and provide a sense of cohesion throughout their personal experiences of asexuality.

In response to this question, Lupine provides exactly this type of story:

> Lupine: So for me, it really happened in two stages, because the first time I was introduced to asexuality, I was in high school, I think it was in 10th grade, and I dated someone who is asexual… When I was in college a couple years later and I was researching more, I think I, I think I watched an Ash Hardell video and then I also watched, I cannot remember their names, but there was a couple of other ace content creators at the time who had videos about discovering they were ace and I watched those and then I was like, okay, this is starting to sound more like me. (*Ep. 240*)

In Lupine's response, she provides two "stages" of the realization process, separated in this example by years in time, new life experiences, and a variety of educational resources. The first stage involves learning about the concept of "asexuality," generally becoming aware of the term. The second stage involves the connection between the concept and the self, as Lupine in this example finds stories of those who identified with "asexuality" and relates to the experiences and feelings described by the term.

Other guests of the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast, during similar conversations about their upbringings and "origin stories" of their asexuality, similarly highlight this learning processes and the "first realization" moments in stories about their identification with asexuality and in describing their motivations for current writing and activist work about providing information to asexuality. It is a common narrative provided by figures of asexuality within this media space, and a tool usable by asexual audience members to frame and communicate their own identity of asexuality. These other guests, from podcasts within the time frame of this study, include poet Kelly Weber, author Michele Kirichanskaya, and racecar driver Michael Klein.

> Weber: I initially kind of came through it through social media. In fact, I think it came through, it, through a social media post that was, like, "20 Jokes You'll Only Understand

> If You're Asexual"… I don't know what prompted me to click on that, but I was like, "oh, asexual." I – immediately, I think something about the term resonated…from there, I went into a deep dive and though, "oh yeah, this is definitely me." (*Ep. 255*)
>
> Kirichanskaya: [My favorite part of writing the book Ace Notes was] just, like, providing, just filling in the sections, I guess, on information that I lacked as a teenager growing up. Like, what would Michele of the past, of my past self, like, would have wanted? What did I not get? And then just trying to say, "oh, I am going to write for my younger self so that younger readers and older readers today can not have to do all the work that I did." (*Ep. 254*)
>
> Klein: I watched a video where this one YouTuber named Thomas Sanders brought together several different people of different orientations. And one of them was ace. And, you know, she kind of explained what that meant. And I kind of came to think, okay, I identify with this. And, you know, from that day on, you know, I've been identifying as such. (*Ep. 261*)

In these discussions and stories about the process of identifying with asexuality, this arrival at the "realization" moment is a constant. Asexuality, as an aspect of a person's own understanding of their identity, is described as an answer to a question the person did not once think to ask. All of these descriptions of acquiring knowledge of possible identities and then identifying with such terms speaks to an understanding of asexuality as something which was once formless and nameless but that now, in the speaker's retelling, contains structure and meaning. The ability to communicate or express asexuality at all is a defining moment.

These descriptions from podcast guests arrive with some degree of prompting, a question like the one Kaszyca asks Lupine about this "realization." But throughout the podcast and social media content around *Sounds Fake But Okay*, this narrative is a repeated theme. Though the social media content is less structured and the discussion of "realization" moments is not prompted, this "first realization" storyline is brought up as a key aspect of asexuality by those online, and discussions contextualizing and deepening the understanding of how one first identifies with asexuality are ongoing within the community. In some instances, this is as direct as a person on the podcast or on the social media sites retelling the narrative of their first encounters with asexuality, or on their relationship with asexual community and resources. In discussion between the hosts, and in less structured conversations on the Discord server among podcast audience members, elements of the realization narrative continue.

Reflection on realization through social media.

The social media posts which fit within this theme of realization offer similar reflections, but in a more fragmented and piecemeal narrative that offers specific insight into the emotional responses remembered by individuals at key points of the process of realization. These include the pain of experiencing asexuality without knowing the associated terminology or community of similar individuals, and the relief in finding information and others that helped make sense of unclear moments and experiences of the past:

> the_great_kate: I think I may have started to cry after learning that being ace was a thing because I felt like I was broken and I didn't encounter anyone [who] felt the same way I do ("Aspec" chat – Jan. 11, 2023)

> frogstarworldb: Reading about other people's experiences was super helpful when IW as figuring myself out. And finding things about me that other people had already learned were acey ("Aspec" chat – Apr. 30, 2023)

> moonlitstars462: I honestly don't know how I didn't realise I was Aroace sooner. I mean when we had the period / pregnancy/ sex talk in primary school all I remember was thinking "why would anyone want to have *that* inside of them" ("Aspec" chat – Apr. 10, 2023)

> tacocat1147: I legit cried during the [sex] talk, and when my mom was finally able to calm me down I said, "Well it's a good thing I don't want to get married because I'm NOT doing that." ("Aspec" chat – Jan. 10, 2023)

> Okollie: Since realizing my identity as aroace a couple of weeks ago (it's been a long time coming tho) I've felt so upset and uncomfortable with the labels but tonight I was giggling and playing with my cat and thought "I'm aroace" and for the first time, it felt a little teensy bit more right. ("Aspec" chat – Jan. 12, 2023)

Many of these stories focus on the terminology of "asexuality" and finding information about its definition. This definition, and the conflicts around settling on a specific definition, was a key question around early asexual scholarship and activism efforts in the early 2000s. In early studies comparing asexuality as a sexual orientation to sexual disorders or medical conditions, asexuality was defined as broadly as "the absence of a traditional sexual orientation" (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279). Continued definition work throughout the 2000s (e.g. Prause & Graham 2007, DeLuzio Chasin 2011) highlighted possible definitions such as lack of sexual attraction, lack of sexual desire, internal preferences toward abstinence, the conglomerate self-definitions provided

by self-identified asexuals, etc. In 2012, Bogaert provided a different definition of asexuality, settling on a general definition of "lack of sexual attraction" but noting that "the phenomenon is likely diverse, so it important to keep in mind that this is a working definition and open to change" (pg. 24). AVEN, the advocacy group centered on increasing the visibility of asexuality and making the definition of asexuality more well known, still today provides a similar definition, with a website header which states that "An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction" as well as an information page under the "About Asexuality" section titled "The Grey Area" which states that "Not everything is a perfect fit. You may feel mostly asexual, but not entirely… This is what we call the gray area – not quite asexual but experiencing many of the same things that asexual do and most sexual people don't." These trends in the research and activist contexts of asexuality speak to the complications around the definition of asexuality that are useful to consider when thinking through the centrality of this definition to the *Realization* narrative offered in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* media and podcast content. If the definition of asexuality is still a working definition, subject to change, and with a notable grey area around its boundaries, what is the definition at the center of these realization stories?

It is, in fact, this exact complicated dynamic of asexuality – all of it – that characterizes the approach to asexuality seen in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* hosts, guests, and audience. There is a recognized, understood "center" of a definition of asexuality, and an understanding that many things beyond this "center" definition may also be asexuality. Podcast hosts Sarah Costello and Kayla Kaszyca, in an episode within this study's time frame, provide an example of how this center definition is known and understood. In an episode dedicated to the two hosts asking questions about asexuality to the "ChatGPT" artificial intelligence web program, they ask the

program to define asexuality and seem generally satisfied with the definition. This episode topic, suggested by an audience member through social media, reflects exactly the type of attempts to use digital media resources to learn about asexuality that is found in many of the realization story examples:

> Kaszyca: Here's the information that [ChatGPT] will give us about asexuality:
>
> "Asexuality is a sexual orientation characterized by a lack of sexual attraction to others. Asexual individuals may still experience romantic attraction and desire intimate relationships, but they do not experience sexual attraction in the same way that allosexual individuals do. Asexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation [and] is not a disorder, a medical condition, or a choice."
>
> Costello: Big slay.
>
> Kaszyca: Slay. (*Ep. 249*)

This positive response to the AI-generated definition of asexuality speaks to this as a type or example of a definition that is acceptable as an answer to the "What is asexuality?" question within this community. It becomes a notable relationship to asexuality identity when combined with the hesitancy within the community of providing more specific or narrow definitions of asexuality. This can be seen in conversations in the podcast's Discord social media comments on other online asexual communities and more restrictive definitions of asexuality:

> barefoot_backpacker: My Twitter feed often gets plastered with aces, aros, aroaces, and others arguing with each other about 'this framing is exclusionary; no it isn't, and if i don't frame it like this I feel excluded' type things which, lbr, I stay out of ("Podcast Ideas" chat – Feb. 28, 2023)

> changelingmx: I'm actually in the process of exiting most of the ace communities. I can't take the in-fighting. This is my ace home. ("Podcast Ideas" chat – Mar. 4, 2023)
>
> weasell531: The situation [in another online asexual community] got bad enough that a splinter group started a sub called "actual asexuals" where they have an incredibly narrow definition of asexuality (i think something along the lines of zero attraction, zero libido, and sex-repulshed) and call anything that falls outside of it "fake asexuality" ("Aspec" chat – Apr. 30, 2023)
>
> rail.works: As someone who knows they're somewhere on the ace spec/aro spec but not sure exactly where (demi/grey are what I jump between) this sort of discourse bothers me in a way which caused me ages [ago] to leave the online aroace community as a whole…Here feels different…Gatekeepers are weird at times like "I'm sorry but you're too allo for the ace community" ("Aspec" chat – Apr. 30, 2023)
>
> akitemadeoofkites: Everyone's acceptance here is absolutely lovely, and I highly appreciate [it] as someone who has felt like I don't couint since I'm hetero demi-graysexual ("Aspec" chat – Apr. 30, 2023)

This final comment also speaks to another unique aspect of the relationship between the definition of asexuality and the online *Sounds Fake But Okay* discussion of asexuality. Micro-labels specifically defining certain types of asexuality and attractions and people are another common source of definitional discussion. In the podcast episode "Microlabels Part 2," their second episode on the topic, the podcast hosts define and discuss a variety of these microlabels, including labels for those who do not experience sexual attraction but still desire sexual relationships (cupiosexual), those who only feel sexual attraction to fictional characters

(fictosexual), those who enjoy having sexual acts performed on them but who do not want to perform acts on others (iamvanosexual), etc. The more obscure microlabels highlighted in this episode also exist alongside more common asexuality microlabels, such as greysexual and demisexual, for those who experience sexual attraction sometimes but not always or in specific circumstances, and who may relate or identify with asexuality in those circumstances. Taken as a whole, the status of the definition, the general acceptance of a broad definition, the dislike of restrictive gatekeeping definitions, and the creation and use of hyper-specific microlabel definitions, are all still vague in their relationship to "finding asexuality" as a core part of the realization narrative.

Realization as personal narrative of coherent identity

What combines all of these different types of definition into a specific tool that can be utilized in personal narratives of identity is how they all work to create a personal cohesion of identity that can be told and performed through digital media. Cover's (2023) description of "identity work" in the context of social media, and how coherence of identity performance through social media is a driving motivation for such media work, is helpful here. Judith Butler's description of illusionary performances of stable gender identity are rearticulated in social media language through Cover as "the act of articulating and stabilizing our identities by making a selection," and act which "may feel like a deliberate act that merely represents ourselves, but is one among the many identity performance acts we undertake every day that retroactively stabilizes our identity as if it is something that emerges from within our very core" (pg. 41). All of the possibilities of asexual identification as articulated through the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast and social media context can be and are used for this context of identity coherence. The "central" definition of lack of sexual attraction provides a basic relief from perceptions of self-

identity as failed, broken, or isolated versions of other identities like heterosexuality or homosexuality, while the distaste for gatekeeping, the desire for open and accepting definitions of asexuality, and the use of microlabels allow for movement within the identity space of asexuality that does not sacrifice one's membership into asexuality or disrupt the coherence of an asexual identity.

In many ways, these are identifiable and intentional uses of these tools to describe the self in relation to many facets of asexuality. Considering the descriptions of isolation and identity loss of those reflecting on their times "before" the realization of asexuality, it stands to reason that a priority in the development of asexual language and terminology is the prevention of forced or self-exile back into that wilderness. "You are still asexual if…" is a powerful call for self-acceptance, and these tools of definitions and labels are used for these purposes of maintaining authenticity and acknowledging an asexuality within the self even if actions or desires fall outside the boundaries of certain definitions. But if the context for the use of these tools is the performance of cohesion of identity – the creation of identifiable terms and stories like the realization narratives that aim to patch inconsistences in identity – that runs the risk of asexuality becoming another avenue towards the cultural expectation of the cohesive self. As Cover (2023) describes the situation, the uses of language that describes the self are

> by no means stable but change, develop and react to the 'making available' of alternative languages and discourses – all of which allow certain kinds of fluidity and change in identity. In that context, there is no actual, genuine authenticity of identity. Rather, we are all from beginning doomed to perform our identities against the possibility that coherence and intelligibility will fail. (pg. 160).

Judged in these terms, asexuality as an alternative language seems especially destined to fail. Its central definition as an absence, when used by individuals to describe an active, present, and positive aspect of their lives and identity, sets itself up to be perceived as a negation under these rules of coherence. Even as the emphasis of definitional language in essential realization origin stories within *Sounds Fake But Okay* speaks to a push towards cohesion, there is an acknowledgement that the emphasis of "lack" in the central definition shapes and organizes experiences of asexuality in ways that are not always helpful.

Asexuality as "Missing Sexuality"

> soup7415: Being ace was definitely a problem, but how big was it really? It was almost entirely my problem, she never showed any issue with it. It was me feeling guilt, that this doesn't work, that I'm not meeting her needs. That I don't really always want physical connection that it doesn't usually mean anything to me, is that wrong of me? … It's all the same questions we ask each other and ourselves in this channel over and over and over again. What is love? What is a relationship? How does it feel? For all the answers I've ever given anyone here, I feel just as lost now as anyone. ("Aspec" chat – Jan. 22, 2023)

As seen in this example of a Discord user in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* social media community, one of the common trends in the discussion of asexuality in this space is the articulation of asexuality as a sexual lack. The "presence" of this lack and its impact in framing and contextualizing conversations about asexuality throughout this media space is seen most directly in the focus on many conversations around "dating" – a collection of romantic and sexual attitudes and behaviors that many asexual people encounter problems with due to the awareness and expectations of those attractions, desires, and feelings that they "lack."

In some contexts, this is an overlapping narrative with the *Realization of Asexual Identity* theme, as the discovery of asexuality can be articulated as the realization of such a lack. However, in the social media space of *Sounds Fake But Okay*, this "lack" is not confined to *Realization* stories. Instead, it is developed and revisited as an aspect of asexual social life, especially in the social media content as members talk and share stories about dating. The context of the interactions and encounters between asexual people and allosexual culture often involve personal connections and partnerships which have cultural connections with sexual attraction and behaviors. There is a complication that arises when an asexual person is confronted with these expectations in pursuit of connection with others, and a subsequent need for these situations to be navigated and the cultural connotations between sex, romance, and personal connection need to be re-articulated from an asexual perspective. Often, this also involves a negotiation of behavior – what an asexual person feels comfortable doing with their body in these contexts, and how those boundaries are articulated to partners and structured within their personal understanding of their own asexuality.

Users and audience members returning to this space can often exist in a sort of cycle between coming to the online environment to discuss, reassure, and "give answers," while also eventually needing to come to an environment with fellow members of the asexual ingroup to receive those things themselves following significant moments. The articulation and framing of connection between individual people are common topics of discussion when discussing dating from an asexual lens. Concepts such as "attraction" and "desire" have significance to the central definition of asexuality, as asexual people are commonly defined by their lack of sexual attraction or sexual desire. Because of this, when other sorts of "attraction" or "desire" present themselves as relevant to asexual people's experiences or intentions to connect with other people,

there is a significant attention paid to articulating what type of attraction or desire is being experienced. These discussions involve how different types of experiences are felt, defined, and categorized within spectrums of asexuality. One user's experience, which prompts a discussion on these issues, showcases these dynamics in simple terms:

> Sydtay: i thought i was attracted to this person but we kissed and it felt like idk sort of bad and wrong and i had to stop … but like up until it happened pretty much i thought i wanted to ("Aspec" chat – May 23, 2023)

Part of the continuation of this conversation involved the type of cataloging and describing of experiences as defined above:

> liftasail: Question – I always thought those fluttery feelings were part of how one defined the difference between romantic feelings light fluttery and platonic or anxious (heavy fluttery). If that is not the case what would said difference be? I'm not sure I quite understand this flutter attraction.
>
> Infiniteglitterfall: For me, the difference isn't in fluttering, it's in what I want to have/do with the person? Like, do I have them up on a pedestal and think they're the coolest and want them to think I'm cool too and want them to want to hang out with me a lot and bond? (friend crush) Or do I want them to also, like, snuggle a lot and let me kiss and nom on them, and lie on top of each other watching TV, and ???? (queerplatonic crush) ("Aspec" chat – May 24, 2023).

Identifying "lack" as a limited descriptor

There is also a self-awareness within the community about this dynamic. One observation about asexuality itself that is commonly made in the podcast content of *Sounds Fake But Okay* is that

several versions of asexuality definitions, languages and stories told by asexual people, and references to asexuality itself are all attempts to articulate a lack. For example, the core definition of asexuality is centered around the lack of sexual attraction, and the absence of similar things such as libido, sexual desire, sexual relationships, romantic attraction, etc.

For some, and as expressed by several hosts, guests, and listeners of *Sounds Fake But Okay*, this aspect of asexual language and definitions places asexuality in a situation where the experiences asexual people are "missing" are core to the identification, and the concept of asexual people as primarily "without" is overwhelming.

Examples of this type of description of asexual include those provided by guest Evie Lupine discussing a realization of a lack of sexual curiosity / sexual resonance:

> Lupine: I realized that I was, like, never in any way curious about, like, pornography or masturbation or anything like that at all…And I went through a period of trying to experiment with stuff, and seeing what felt right or felt good. And nothing really resonated with me in the way that I sort of expected that it should. (*Ep. 240*)

In a podcast episode focused on the topic of "Signs we were aspec," in which the hosts discuss aspects of their life and upbringing that, in retrospect, contain asexual resonances, these are sometimes discussed as noticing and articulating similar lacks:

> Kaszyca: I think my first one is that I did not have my first crush until fifth grade. Which, like, didn't seem like a big thing. And I thought [it] was normal until I started to allos and they were like "yeah, I had my first, like, boyfriend in kindergarten." (*Ep. 243*)

The trend seen within these spaces of a self-conscious articulation of lack in the context of dating, and its role in helping individuals process the moments of realization and their

continuing questions about the role of their asexual identity in their own lives, tracks with similar trends found in both the representation of asexuality in media spaces and in the research on asexual people and their lives. It is reflected in news coverage of asexuality from mainstream sources, which often focus on asexuality within the context of its introduction of complications into modern love and dating. Recent articles from mainstream publications and websites about asexuality include “My Girlfriend is Asexual and I’m not. Here’s What That Means For Us” from *Vice* (Veress, 2023), and “I don’t like sex, but I still like to date” from *Business Insider* (Clark, 2023), and “How asexual and aromantic people make Valentine’s Day their own” in *The Washington Post* (Chery, 2023). These trends in modern coverage are also reflective of themes in modern media, with stories about asexual people dating or understanding the role of asexuality in their other potential romantic relationships define asexual narratives in television shows such as *Shadowhunters, BoJack Horseman,* and *Emmerdale*.

How asexual people talk about their own identity as a lack both reinforces and is reinforced by this overwhelming amount of media content. These trends are reflected in asexual research, as many studies involving asexual people similarly highlight the role of asexuality within dating culture. These include interview research on the subversion of partnership norms and family roles as identified in asexual interview participants. Examples include such research by Dawson (2016) and Vares (2017), which are particularly noteworthy examples for their articulation of the research purpose of these investigations and their distinct identity as asexual research trends. Vares summarizes this position by noting that a “postructuralist” reading of asexuality, which begins from discussions of asexuality in the context of its radical potential, is distinct from the epistemological position that “attends to the lived experiences of participants, their perspectives and their social relationships/interactions” (pg. 527). It is consistent research

into this group of asexual people and their considerations of lived experiences that suggests an attentiveness in asexual people to the relevance of their identity in these contexts of relationships and dating.

In a Robbins, Low, and Query (2016) study on the "coming out" narratives of asexual people, they observe that after arriving at an asexual identity and understanding their own lack of sexual attraction as an identity marker, the contexts of identity salience are specific to dating. As these researchers write, "some romantically orientated participants described asexuality as irrelevant to everyone but the individual and his or her partner" (pg. 754) and that for others, their description of asexuality was marked by non-salience or indifference, with respondents saying that "Sexuality/asexuality is by my choice a non-issue in my life" and that "Having a word to describe myself made conversations about my future easier to navigate. Otherwise, it doesn't affect me much" (pg. 755). From these observations, the researchers concluded that "An asexual identity is not acted out…other than abstaining from romantic coupling and sexual activity" (pg. 758). It is not only that asexuality is invisible outside of these contexts, it ceases to exist. There is no way of "doing asexuality" or "being asexual" outside of these contexts. There is just an asexual option within sexual society.

While this definition is seen as beneficial to understanding asexuality in general and helping those with these experiences identify with a queer orientation, this sense of absence, loss, and "missing" can also be seen as an inaccurate phrasing or framing of asexuality for people who believe that asexuality is a positive, additive component to their identity and in their lives. For such people, there is a more explicit attempt articulated in these online media and community spaces to create or develop languages around asexuality that focus on it as the additive to their

identity that it feels like, or as a valid alternative without the emphasis on absence and loss. The podcast interview with asexual poet Kelly Weber speaks to this dynamic directly:

> Weber: A lot of my goal in this book was to frame asexuality and aromanticism as not "absence" or "lack" or this, kind of, missing component of the speaker's life, but rather as something very lush and very beautiful, which has kind of been my experience going through life as an ace/aro person. And I find my life is very full indeed, and not, kind of this, built around this absence, which, I think, sometimes asexuality can be defined as something that's missing or absent.
>
> Costello: Yeah, "it's a lack" is often the word used as well. (*Ep. 255*)

One noteworthy element of this interview is that, in a way that speaks to the presence of "lack" in the understanding and definition of asexuality, Weber also describes the parts of the realization moment of asexuality in their life as being around articulating and speaking to something not present in their life:

> Weber: I think it was only reaching adulthood that I look back and realized how different my experiences and puberty had been from friends who were allo, you know? Because we would get to adulthood and start comparing notes and all my 20 something friends were like, "oh," this, you know this this person was my sexual awakening" and it was like, oh, I never really had one of those. And whenever all my friends had crushes on people as a kid, I always assume they were faking. Because it was 100% fake for me, anytime I would, you know, slightly fake an interest in somebody to fit in. I kind of assumed everybody was just sort of making it up to fit in until we, you know, reached

> later teens and adulthood and realized, “Oh no. They’re not faking, I’m the one who’s having a different experience here.”
>
> Kaszyca: Yeah, I feel like, we did a while episode a couple weeks ago about, like, signs from your childhood that you were aspec, because there was so much that came up of looking back of like, “oh, hm, yeah, I thought this was normal and everyone is saying that this isn’t what they did.” So that’s weird. (*Ep. 255*)

Another podcast interview, with asexual journalist and author Michele Kirichanskava, speaks to this dynamic as well, clearly articulating the split between two different understandings of asexuality: the central definition that is articulated for an audience of non-asexual people or those who are questioning their sexuality, and a different understanding of the orientation for those who are affirmed and solidified in their asexual identity:

> Kirichanskava: My publishing team would describe [my book] as a non-fiction guide on asexuality. Kind of, like, the “101s” and going “beyond the 101s.” Because I was tired of every article saying, oh, “asexuality is this and that,” like, “it’s the orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction.” And I wanted a book where there was more information beyond that. (*Ep. 254*)

In continuing the interview with the podcasts hosts, Kirichanskava also discusses the process of developing this “beyond a 101” concept of asexuality as a collaborative process which heavily features the perspectives of other members of the asexual community

> Costello: How did you decide on the setup and format of the book? Because you have chapters that, I think, are “traditional 101” and “beyond a 101” but you also have interviews and short interludes and resources and that sort of thing.

> Kirichanskava: ... I just kind of developed it as I went along. I wanted to pull the topics that were resting in my head and I thought maybe other people would be curious about and putting those on the page…I knew that people would want further resources because aces are curious and they always want to learn more. And for the interviews, I thought, I don't want my perspective on aces to be the only one featured in this book.
>
> Costello: It's so interesting to me that all of the aspec books that have come out recently really have relied a lot upon not just the author's perspective, but other people in the community's perspective, whether you do that through interviews or through some sort of survey or something. And I just think that's so interesting because I think it says a lot about aspecs, about how we want people to have an expansive understanding of what can be. And we don't want to limit it to ourselves. (*Ep. 254*)

What connects both of these perspectives, as identified by the podcast guests, is the consideration of asexuality in a productive and active way, that speaks to the lived-in experiences of asexual people as core to the expansion of asexual identity. These instances also show how this is a separate project of asexuality, outside of other efforts involving the definition such as spreading visibility and awareness. In fact, as both interviews indicate, occasionally the simplicity and language of the definition of asexuality, as promoted for the goal of outside awareness and wider identification, can conflict with efforts of constructing these other considerations of asexuality. In turn, efforts of this construction of other definitions of asexuality – how asexual can be seen as a constructive and active identity and perspective – can be seen within the media space of *Sounds Fake But Okay*.

Asexuality as a Distinct Perspective

The project of *Sounds Fake But Okay* most engages with the expansion of asexuality and asexual identity through the articulation and suggestion of unique asexual perspectives and lenses on elements of non-asexual, allosexual, and sexual culture. Part of this attempt is an effort to articulate "non-asexuality" as something more than the expected norms and cultures of society, but as traits unique to "allosexuality" as defined in parallel to asexuality. There are many references in the podcast content to "allo culture," finding unique phenomena and traits to associate with this type of culture as defined as an outgroup.

Some of these contexts involve questioning terminology or common patterns of behavior the asexual participants in this conversation see as unusual or strange as an asexual person themselves.

> bagel.b: what the hell does it mean when a straight girl is like "I have a girl crush on this person" or like whatever the guy version man crush thing is ("Aspec" chat – Feb. 28, 2023)

> thedogwoods: my roommate was explaining to me yesterday why some (straight, traditional) couples are uncomfortable with single opposite-gender people being friends with one of them or staying over like if they're visiting or whatever and that's just something I've never thought of with an aspec lens and it's been non-stop blowing my mind since then ("Aspec" chat – Feb. 6, 2023)

> Kaszyca: [I tried] to find out how often, I supposed, an allo, or just your average, the average person…like, how many hours a day they think about sex. I think the most common answer that people talk about, and they always talk about men, it's that men

think about sex every seven seconds

Costello: That cannot be right. (*Ep. 247*)

Kaszyca: Some of the best advice I have for, like, trying to figure out if you're a-spec is, like, go to someone who you know for sure is allo and just try to, like, compare notes. And if they're really off, then maybe there's something to think about there. Allos, just, like, living with allos, and, like, most of the people I know…It's just funny hearing them talk about their escapades because I'm always just, like, like, one of my friends was dating this guy who's, like, a travel nurse. So, he was like only in town for a little bit. And I was like, "what the fuck is the point?" Like, why are you doing? In my mind, I was like, yeah, why, he's just leaving. I just can't. It doesn't make sense in my brain, you know? (*Ep. 243*)

Costello: What's the most memorable thing the allos did this year.

Kaszyca: …The whole season of *Love is Blind* truly was, the allos were allo-ing. (*Ep. 241*)

Other threads of these conversations involve the discussion of aspects of culture that are explicitly associated with sex or relationships.

Unetortueenliberte: i'm absolutely down for an aro thing on the *day that shall not be named* [Valentine's Day] ("Podcast Talk" chat – Jan. 21, 2023)

wahlflower: I will always remember the experience of being the only aspec in the classroom. I don't remember the actual point of the activity but the class divided into two groups, male and female. (Already not a great start.) And we had to discuss our ideal type of the opposite gender. Everyone is going into hyper specific details, pulling up

> reference pics they already had on their phones. And I'm just sitting confused in a corner looking at the teacher as my only thought was "I'd like them to be taller than me. If possible." Why was this a thing? Don't remember. It was a Health and Wellness class. And I remember the teacher explaining how unrealistic their ideals were through height and weight statistics . ("Podcast Talk" chat – Jan. 21, 2023)

These examples also involve criticism or mockery of these habits and cultural tendencies of non-asexual people:

> Costello: We're doing Mad Libs [on this episode of the podcast] because sometimes the shit that allos say sound like Mad Libs when they're talking about sex and romance. (*Ep. 252*)

> Costello: This is…allos making fun of allos, but have you seen those, on Tiktok, I've seen them on Instagram, where this girl and her boyfriend do satirical versions of pregnancy announcements, and they get increasingly insane and absurd…they're funny, and super cringy, and just making fun of allos, which is good. (*Ep. 241*)

This is how the asexual people in these environments conceptualize, describe, and otherwise talk about a non-asexual outgroup. As considerations of what "is" or "isn't" asexuality are discussed in these platforms, the consideration of allosexuality, "allos," and "allo culture" allows for a named identity and collection of social values, attitudes, and behaviors that this group decidedly isn't a part of. Crucially, this definition is not inherently connected to individuals that are or want to be in paired romantic or relationships with any asexual person in particular. Dating, sex, and relationships are still common contexts of these descriptions of "allos," but whereas the dating and relationship contexts for other perceptions of asexuality are

crucial in shaping what asexuality exists and where it exists, here allosexuality is simply provided as an alternative social identity.

Much of this content regarding allosexuality as a social identity can be seen as a reaction to the difficult rhetorical situation the language of asexuality places asexual people, defined by their lacks of what elsewhere and otherwise exists. When contextualized by the assumptions of universal sexuality, what is not asexual becomes what is universal, normal, the natural state of existence from which asexuality is an unusual deviation. Discussing non-asexuality within these terms by following the math of these languages, cancelling the negatives and referring to non-asexuality as "sexuality" plays into these ostracizing dynamics.

Allosexuality allows for a reversal of these dynamics, for non-asexuality to be redescribed and labelled in the languages of asexuality; for it to be placed among other precise, technical descriptions of individuals in relation to their sexual attractions and behaviors. This reaffirms dynamics of broad acceptance of varied orientations and the precise naming and categorization of lived experiences that reflect discussions of asexuality within this community.

This framing of allosexuality also reaffirms the visibility and education mission of asexuality in a unique way, as within this framing, those who are "allosexual" have a greater chance of not understanding that they are "allosexual" due to a lack of familiarity with this terminology. The title of "allosexual" itself plays off of the linguistic origin of "a-" sexuality. Just as "asexuality" utilizes the Greek prefix "a-" meaning "not," so does the term "allosexuality" utilize the Greek prefix "allo-" meaning "other" to signify those with sexual attraction to others. The expansion of this definition and a greater self-identification of non-asexual people as "allosexual" serves as another front on a battle against universal sexuality.

Asexuality and gender

The discussion of the asexual lens is also the most direct space in the podcast content where asexuality is mentioned through its intersectional link with another axis of identity: gender. Costello describes the inherent linking of these two concepts explicitly:

> Costello: Something we've found additionally in writing our book was, the more you dive into this – the aspec lens, the aspec experience – the more it just becomes linked with gender. Because, especially for someone who was assigned female at birth and, you know, raised in that environment, like, your sexuality is so much related to your gender and the way people perceive that. (*Ep. 255*)

Costello, during a conversation about her "gender journey" expands on this connection at a personal level as well:

> Costello: I have come to realize that this was no my trying to distance myself from girlhood. This was me trying to distance myself from femininity, and specifically the rules and expectations surrounding femininity. And part of that, I think, is connected directly to my sexuality, because I did not want to be perceived sexually, especially not as a sexual object, under any circumstances…If I didn't grow up in an environment where I, like, I knew that gendered social expectations were bearing down on me at all times, maybe I wouldn't feel as connected to the woman of it all. And maybe I would use a different label or use different pronouns. But I don't live in that universe. (*Ep. 241*)

In describing the process of writing their book on asexuality, the podcast hosts identified a similar dynamic in others on the topic of sexuality and gender:

> Kaszyca: Some of the quotes we used [in our book]…I remember there were a couple of people that said, like, "yeah, one of the reasons I, like, don't feel connected to, like, being a woman is because, like, in society, a large part of being a woman is being, like, an object of desire."
>
> Costello: Mhm.
>
> Kaszyca: Or, like, "you are a woman because you are in relation to a man." Like, the thing that makes you a woman is that you're not a man. But then once you take away, like, the feminine activity of, like, being a girlfriend or a wife or whatever then it's like, "well, then what is the point?" (*Ep. 241*)

Kaszyca's description of sexual identity and attraction in the context of bisexuality in a couple of examples also speaks to this understanding of gender as inherent to the experience of sexual attraction and definition of sexual identity:

> Kaszyca: I found an article on Mashable about this…she talks about how women's sexuality is kind of defined by the validation you get from men.
>
> Costello: Mm.
>
> Kaszyca: And that her attraction to women just feels different. And that kind of attraction just feels better suited to the self-discovery she was able to get through TikTok. Because I think it's kind of similar to what I was saying, that it can be more of a personal, slow thing.
>
> Costello: Mhm,
>
> Kaszyca: Which is not typically how media portrays sexual attraction between women and men. (*Ep. 249*)

Kaszyca: If you're somewhat attracted to multiple genders, that, that attraction can be different depending on the gender.

Costello: Yeah.

Kaszyca: And I feel like, I've not, like, I've seen queer women talk about that, about, like, bi women, especially about, like, how their attraction and, like, relationships manifest differently with men versus women.

Costello: Yeah.

Kaszyca: But I had never thought about it as almost, like, a completely different sexuality depending on the gender. (*Ep. 260*)

These discussions of gender track with the research that considers sexual identity and gender within the context of asexuality. Examples include Gupta's (2019) accounting of different experiences of asexuality between white, middle-class men and women, identifying in general terms that male sexual norms conflict more with male asexuality, while the specific norm of women being denied a "right to refuse sexuality" harms asexual women's sexual autonomy. Continuing studies on the sexual behaviors of asexual people also note gender distinctions in their findings (e.g. Yule, Brotto, and Gorzalka, 2017) and these are also investigated alongside the general trend of asexual women being more prominent in survey studies than asexual men.

The key distinction, however, between the research on asexuality and identity and the expression of asexual identity in *Sounds Fake But Okay* is that in the former gender is considered alongside other axes of identity such as race and disability. Examples include interview research by Foster et al. (2019) investigating the intersectional links of sexuality, gender, and race in asexual women of color interview participants, or case study investigations into asexual identity

in China by Wong and Guo (2020) which emphasizes in particular the links between class status and personal agency as key factors shaping individual expressions of asexual pride.

Navigation of Intersectional Groups of Asexuality

> Kaszyca: I'm imagining it as a big circle, and there's circles inside the circle. But then if every circle starts to get bigger, then there's not enough room for all of the circles, so the big ones have to get a little smaller, and the small ones have to get a little bigger.
>
> Costello: I'm imagining it like that, but more like a room with squares on the floor. I'm imagining it like a Clue board. And the gay, white, cis gays are... They just have, like, a really big section. They have, like, an entire section of the club themselves. They have the VIP section, and it's huge. And they have a bouncer for their own section for some reason. And then the aspecs have, like, a little booth they've carved out for themselves. And, you know, there are other groups. We've got the, you know, the Black trans women. They're struggling out there, too. They've got, like, a little high-top table. And if we take a little bit of the cis gay space and distribute it, we will all have more fun, because the cis white gays will have a more varied, diverse experience that is less fucking insular. (*Ep. 246*)

With regard to the asexual community in general, there is an observation that greater attempts to platform marginalized voices are needed to better account for and make visible the lived diversity of asexuality and attend to experiences and understandings of asexuality that are shaped by intersectional links to other identities. This is an especially relevant discussion when considering race and the perceived relationship between asexuality and whiteness. This relationship is observed explicitly in the Sounds Fake But Okay podcast content, where it is

acknowledged alongside statements of intent to broaden the visibility of non-white asexual people and voices.

A podcast discussion about the need for asexuals to "take up space" in discourse and queer communities features the hosts speaking on this dynamic of marginalization

> Costello: Advocating for yourself and taking up space as an aspec person, as an autistic aspec person, as an aspec person of color, as a Muslim aspec person. Like, whatever identifiers you have, you know, taking up that space helps to make the community look more like it actually is. (*Ep. 246*)
>
> Kaszyca: Those people of marginalized identities are going to have an even harder time taking up space than Sarah or I. Because, as we said, "oh, we're women, so it makes it harder to take up space." But if we were, you know, a Black woman aspec, that's going to make things even harder to feel comfortable taking up space.
>
> Costello: I'm white. Do you know how fucking easy that makes so much shit?
>
> Kaszyca: Yeah. Most things.
>
> Costello: Most shit. Yeah. (*Ep. 246*)

In terms of media representation and visibility of the asexual community, the overrepresentation of whiteness is also discussed in the podcast interview with asexual poet Kelly Weber:

> Weber: A lot of the aspec media in general that we have is broadly over representative of white identities and, so, you know, even though I'm very glad to have my collection published, you know, I myself am an extremely privileged white author as well…I think the aspec community in general has been really dominated by white voices and so I'm

> glad see more literature coming out and my hope is that even more diverse literature would come out after this and I hope that there's, there's increasingly more and more, better representation for all types of voices and identities in our communities, and not just white perspectives.
>
> Costello: Even just looking at the, the aspec books that have come out recently, we've had, we've talked to a lot of those people on the podcast. We are some of those people. But it has been overwhelmingly white. You know, Sherronda J Brown's book came out, which was delightful-
>
> Weber: -I loved that book.
>
> Costello: -but most of the other books that have come out in the recent months have been by white people. And I think that's something we grapple with as well, because it's like, we absolutely want to give a platform to these books, but we also don't want to be, like, "This is a white aspec pod," you know? And so it's a delicate balance that I think the community as a whole kind of grapples with. (*Ep. 255*)

Within the podcast content (which is primarily where this type of conversation takes place, as opposed to the social media spaces around *Sounds Fake But Okay*), there is understanding in these moments that something is missing from their consideration of asexual identity that could be made more well-rounded and complete through the encouragement of diverse voices and populations within the asexual community.

These general descriptions of asexuality as an insular community with a problem of assumed identity, and especially whiteness, is one area where the asexual media content production is more observed and focused than current asexualities research. Michael Paramo for the asexual publication *Aze* wrote the article "Interrogating the Whiteness of the Asexual

Community," and argues that this perception of asexuality is a result of the influence of "selective and highly white online spaces, such as email lists and blogs in the late 1990s and early 2000s" in the development of asexual identity. These provide class implications as well, if the identity category of asexuality requires an internet connection as a part of the information and realization processes. Angela Chen in the mass market asexuality book *Ace* (2020) describes the role of race in this process of identification as well:

> Picture whiteness as a neutral backdrop, a white wall. It is easier to paint a white wall light blue than it is to paint a dark green wall light blue…White people, for the most part, have the freedom to be anything they like. People of color need to scrub away the dark green – racial stereotypes and expectations – before determining whether we are *really* ace (Chen, 2020, pg.71).

Black asexual model and activist Yasmin Benoit also speaks often about this perception of asexuality and her own presence as an example of non-white asexuality. As she told Paper Magazine, "People perceive my asexuality differently than white asexual people…People find it harder to compute that a Black woman can be asexual just because we're hypersexualized a lot more" ("Meet the activist debunking asexuality stereotypes, 2019). *Sounds Fake But Okay* has found itself in this conversation about the whiteness of asexuality most directly through a confrontation with Benoit, when Benoit took to Twitter to ask that her previously published interview on the podcast be removed from publication. As the *Sounds Fake But Okay* Twitter account described it in an apology post, "The reason she felt compelled to make this request was the result of harm she believes that we have perpetuated against her, primarily on a racial basis. We at SFBO do not have the same memory as Yasmin on what happened at the events in

question, but we recognize that as white activists it is not our place to make such a judgement call on matters of race" (Sounds Fake But Okay, 2021).

In considering these perspectives on race, asexuality, and whiteness, it is useful to consider the distinction between the approach to gender and race in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast content. While race is discussed as a topic within asexuality as a community, it is less essential to the construction of the "asexual lens" as gender is. There is a willingness to investigate many avenues of gender, including the perspective of the hosts and their relationship with femininity, or asexual people in gender around the podcast and their personal experiences of gender, and utilize that as a shaping experience around understanding the intersections of gender and asexuality. The experience of whiteness does not inspire such an investigation into the role of race. The Benoit post-appearance criticism of the show and the hosts' conduct highlights a limitation of this approach to identity. As a community, an emphasis on an inclusive mindset and the awareness of asexual people of different races without a co-existing effort to make visible intersections of privilege and interrogations may not prevent exclusionary asexuality from existing. Whiteness is an influence on the experience of asexuality, and asexuality, like other identity categories, can conceptually and practically be used within its intersection with Whiteness as a tool of White supremacy. These are elements of asexuality and of social life that would benefit from the same sort of attention and visibility-making efforts seen elsewhere in this space of online asexuality.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, the three research questions are addressed and answered after limitations of the present study are described. For RQs 1 and 2, distinction between the podcast content and the social media content of *Sounds Fake But Okay* is discussed in the context of asexual social identity, as well as the creation of a non-asexual outgroup, and the intersectional links between various identities and asexuality. For RQ3, the connection between asexual media trends and narratives and the expression of asexual social identity in the podcast content is discussed.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the relative exclusion of other social media sites. While the *Sounds Fake But Okay* presence on TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram was not as extensive as the Discord content, the nature of TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram and the increased ability for posts on those websites to escape the audience of the podcast may have provided useful insight on the reaction to *Sounds Fake But Okay*'s content and perspective to those outside of its own community. Sampling was also a limitation, as other podcast episodes outside of the sample may have provided more detail on certain aspects of asexual social identity as it is considered by the podcast hosts and guests.

Research Questions 1

The first research question proposed in this study asked: 1) How is asexuality constructed as a social identity in *Sounds Fake But Okay*, in relation to various outgroups and in the context of the power dynamics and intersectional identity links of gender, race, class, and disability?

Social Identity Theory and in-group/out-group comparisons

In considering the development of asexual social identity in the media space of *Sounds Fake But Okay*, it will be useful to consider social identity theory (SIT), positionality, and intersectionality as useful descriptions of identity-forming processes and how these processes are reflected in the podcast and social media content considered here. Beginning with SIT, this theoretical lens considers the comparisons between in-groups and out-groups and the development of in-group identity through processes of individual identification and comparison (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner and Reynolds, 2010). The identify development process described by this theory can be directly seen in the *Realization* theme of the podcast and social media content of *Sounds Fake But Okay*. These themes involved the creation of a storyline describing one's own discovery of asexuality, answers to the questions (as asked directly by the podcast hosts) of "When did you discover your asexuality? How did you come to that realization?" These stories are constructed around, in SIT terms, the internalization of the group definition and identity, and are retold in this space to affirm and communicate a person's own relationship to the in-group. Within the podcast content, this is often offered as a direct line of questioning that introduces an asexual person to the podcast audience.

Considering the examples of *Realization of Asexual Identity* storytelling in the podcast and social media content of *Sounds Fake But Okay*, it is possible to examine the role of communication within this SIT process of individual identification. Because of asexuality's cultural invisibility, a great deal of identity weight is placed on the ability to locate language and terminology that define asexual experiences and explain those distinctions to others. Within this group, this process of finding a definition is embraced by many asexual people as a social marker of their identity and exists as a method by which individuals attempt to make their identity more

logical and coherent. Through the communication of the identification process, asexuality "seems" less "fake."

Alongside the internalization of the in-group identity at an individual levels, the lens of SIT also highlights the process of creating moments of comparison between the identified in-group and those in the out-group who are not part of the social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner and Reynolds, 2010). In the podcast content, this can also be seen within the *Realization* theme, as these storylines often involve the understanding of a significant distinction between "me" and "other people" on the basis of sexuality. This vague idea of the outgroup is used in the *Realization* theme to identify the specific identity position of oneself. It is made a bit more specific in posts that fall within the *Missing Sexuality* theme, as this content in the podcast and social media considers the central aspect of the definition of asexuality – the "lack of sexual attraction" – and identifies the theme of "lack" as socially significant in the experience of asexuality. Experiences are defined by things (feelings, moments of childhood, desires) that were not there for the asexual individual. Statements from the social media content ("i though i was attracted to this person but we kissed and it felt like idk sort of bad and wrong," "I don't really always want physical connection…is that wrong of me.") and the podcast content ("I went through a period of trying to experiment with stuff…and nothing really resonated with me.") speak directly to these themes.

This consideration of the "lack" of sexuality carries with it considerable implications about how asexuality is discussed and the tools of language used by asexual people to discuss themselves and their experiences. This tendency is acknowledged directly within the text of the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast as well, with interviews with guests that produce media content aimed at going "beyond the 101s" of asexual definition and developing a poetry around

asexuality. The quote from Kelly Weber on articulating new asexual definitions and languages speaks directly to the identity nonverification that can be caused by this aspect of asexual language: “A lot of my goal in this book was to frame asexuality and aromanticism as not ‘absence’ or ‘lack’ … but rather as something very lush and very beautiful, which has kind of been my experience going through life as an ace/aro person. And I find my life is very full indeed.” This example shows how directly communication is involved with the self-image of social identity, and how the desired changes of that self-image are sought through attempts at changing language.

It is also notable that these direct discussions about changing language are more prominent in the podcast content than they are in the social media and Discord content surrounding *Sounds Fake But Okay*. This may be due to the prominence of online asexuality’s focus on spreading a concrete definition of asexuality being more core to the online user experience of asexuality, and a hesitation for changing language that may confuse the mission of visibility and education. Or, perhaps it is because this consideration is more relevant and pressing for those actively attempt to create published writing about asexuality, such as these particular podcast hosts and guests.

Positionality and the contexts of sexual identity

These patterns and developments make up a large part of the consideration of social identity of asexuality within the context of the podcast and social media content of *Sounds Fake But Okay* from the perspective of the processes described by social identity theory. In considering positionality, asexual social identity is “identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context” (Alcoff, 1988). This lens plays directly into these considerations of asexuality in *Sounds Fake But Okay* as opposed to the non-asexual “other” of the surrounding environment

and of allosexuality. These are all conditions that make up the context of "universal sexuality" as it has also been defined in asexual literature, and as it is referenced in spaces like the *Sounds Fake But Okay* media environment as the assumption that all individuals are inherently sexual that the presence of asexuality conflicts with directly.

This possibility of asexuality is directly referenced by those in this space as a key aspect of their own ideas and images of asexualities. The contrast with allosexuality and the environment of universal sexuality is part of the context that creates the "lack" definition and framing, and suggests asexuality as existing within a unique position to challenge such assumptions more directly. In this way, the "radicality" of asexuality as suggested by theorists such as Chazin (2013) is in its ability to challenge existing norms is in some way practiced in the development of asexual social identity. The constantly moving context of identity is an explicit part of the discussion and definition of asexuality and asexual experience as it is approached in the channels of *Sounds Fake But Okay*. These often come in the form of social expectations and assumptions of identity, behaviors of intimacy and sexuality, and life decisions that are influenced by outside perceptions of humans as universal sexual beings. Often, "asexuality" can be defined in these instances as the lived experience of identifying in contrast to these social contexts. To be asexual is to be in a place where these assumptions are not held true or consistent in their definition of human sexuality, and the position of asexuality in conflict with such norms can be the starting position for new knowledge.

Tien (2020) describes an essential part of positionality as the analysis of how "identity categories use the same discourses as, and thus reinscribe, the very socially constructed categories they aim to contest" (pg. 529) and the relationship between power, politics, and discourse in the creation of identity. These aspects of positionality can be seen affecting

discourse around asexuality and identity in *Sounds Fake But Okay.* One of the observations that social identity theory leads to in the analysis of the podcast material is that much of the work about language and asexuality in the podcast creates or emphasizes specific terminology and specific concepts that aim to give shape and voice to identities or orientations that otherwise would exist in the cracks and gaps between more common terms. "Asexuality" and "allosexuality" fit this description most directly, aiming to give space to asexuality as a valid, "non-fake" option of identity, and aiming to remove the naturalization and universality of "normal sexuality" with the allosexual categorization.

However, in considering Tien's observation about "the same discourses" and the re-inscription of existing categories, the logics behind these creations of terminology and language do still build up the context of cohesive identity. These terms, along with the other descriptions of specific types of asexuality and repeated narratives about discovering asexuality itself, are very tied to the need for a cohesive identity that diminishes non-hegemonic identities more broadly. In providing languages to make an asexual language and identity more cohesive, stable, and "not fake," there is an admission that the degree of cohesion within a particular identity is a relevant question to ask of identity and to judge different identities as they seek more visibility and space in the public eye. In agreeing to these terms of discourse and committing to incohesive identity as a legitimate problem, this type of language construction limits the ability of asexuality to conceptually challenge these underlying assumptions of identity.

The role of power in *Sounds Fake But Okay* as it relates to identity construction and asexual analysis is also a relevant matter of positionality. Though there is discourse between the audience and the podcast hosts, it is certainly true that the perspectives of podcast hosts Sarah Costello and Kayla Kaszyca are very influential in the use of the "asexual perspective" that the

podcast aims to build. Because asexuality in this space, as a social identity, finds itself concerned with and active towards the visibility of otherwise invisible sexual and social dynamics, the decision about what invisible targets at which this perspective directed at is the decision of the most powerful figures within this space of cultural identity creation. What, to these hosts, are glaring omissions of asexuality in language and media spaces define their targets of asexual analysis, and their experiences of asexuality (and, in particular, the relationship between gender and sexuality in the creation of an asexual perspective) shapes how they refine and reconsider asexuality as a theory and as a social identity. In turn, what remains invisible to them remains invisible to the environment in which they hold power. Invisibilities of asexuality that other researchers and activists have targeted, such as race, class, and disability, are not as central in the analysis in this space and stick out as remaining invisibilities.

This is an important dynamic within asexuality media as a whole because of the status *Sounds Fake But Okay* has as a prominent example of asexual media by asexual people, its availability and presence as a symbol of asexuality outside of its own context, and its status as a still-existing asexual podcast amongst others that have ceased production in recent years. As asexual media expands and its ability to confront such invisibilities becomes more widespread, more diverse and varied examples of media doing this work will be necessary. Hints of this can be seen in the more diverse characters and book authors that asexual media has provided in recent years, but this has not yet been as true for digital spaces.

Gender as the most visible intersection with asexuality

In addition to positionality and social identity theory, intersectionality as a lens of social identity is relevant to the construction of asexual social identity in *Sounds Fake But Okay*. There is an understanding of other, overlapping aspects of identity as linked to both the concept of

asexuality and the power dynamics of the asexual community, but these articulations vary in approach depending on the axes of identity being considered. Within the podcast content, gender is presented as the most essential to the understanding of asexuality as it is linked to social identity and perspective. As Costello says, "the more you dive into this – the aspec lens, the aspec experience – the more it just becomes linked with gender." Femininity in particular is a focus on this gendered understanding of asexuality, and the expectations and pressured faced by women as the objects of desire is a core aspect of the definition of "universal sexuality" that is challenged by asexuality and discussed as negative by asexual people in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* media environment.

In other contexts, however, identity is discussed through the lens of *Navigation of Intersectional Groups of Asexuality*, to attempt an understanding of various types of asexual people and what their needs are as it relates to the asexual community. These conversations are most involved regarding the safety of trans asexual people in the context of a wider transphobic environment, and regarding Black asexual people in the context of an asexual media environment that privileges and prioritizes white voices. There is an essential split here between the consideration of some aspects of identity as essential to the concept of asexuality as an identity (gender), some aspects of identity as a lived fact of others within the asexual community (race, trans identity) and some as less observed in their connection to identity compared to the considerations of identity in asexual literature (class, disability). When the topic of conversation involves asexual people as a community, is impossible and irresponsible to consider the asexual community without understanding the intersection of race. But with asexuality as a whole, and as a social identity, the central link is gender. This is distinct from how asexuality is considered and constructed within academic research on asexuality, where gender and feminism are considered

alongside race and disability as shaping forces in the position of asexuality and its intersectional links with other identities.

Research Question 2

The second research question proposed in this study asked: 2) How is asexuality constructed as a social identity in the social media response to the podcast, in relation to various outgroups and in the context of the power dynamics and intersectional identity links of gender, race, class, and disability?

The information contexts of online asexual communities

The nature of online asexuality communication is largely centered on the information landscape of the orientation, and how the definition is made to be known and spread. The language of information about asexuality is such a core aspect here that it is reasonable that the social identity established through the same media channels would be, in the same way, connected to the "lack of sexual attraction" definition of asexuality, and that the storytelling and communication of asexuality would therefore concern itself with this articulation of a lack.

On its own, this content centered around framing one's own experience as defined by the theme of *Asexuality as "Missing Sexuality"* in many situations does represent a split from the SIT model of identification. In the theory established by Tajfel and Turner (1979) this process should involve the curation of a positive self-image for the in-group. The reaction to representation exists between the comfort of positive representation that provides identity verification and the confrontation with images that go against the meanings of the identity to the in-group and provide nonverification (Davis et al, 2019). In considering these SIT processes of comparison and self-image, the *Missing Sexuality* theme speaks directly to the potential outcome

of nonverification for asexual identity. The context of the comparison between asexual in-groups and out-groups being “lack” or “without” or “missing” frames asexuality as a connection between haves and have notes. Because of the language and communications of patterns, this is true even within media contexts such as *Sounds Fake But Okay* that promote a positive identification with asexuality more generally.

This question social media content revolves around is the consideration of resources, when asexual people need something, what do they look for within this space? What does “being asexual” mean in the abstract, and as an asexual person, how do I do “that?” These considerations shape the discourse and discussion around lived experiences, needs of information, and spreading awareness of asexuality vocabulary. To ensure that this space is made accessible and available for different types of asexual people to access these conversations and resources, the definition of asexual community centers on a self-described aim for inclusivity, mostly on types of sexual attitudes and behavior.

The question of asexual intersectionality and the relationship between various identity categories and asexuality was a noticeable absence in the social media group. Some of the social media content continued podcast conversations about the unique experience of asexuality and gender, including perspectives from women and trans people. Race, class, and disability were addressed much less frequently than gender was in the social media content, following a similar pattern found in the podcast content. The one instance of race appearing explicitly in the Discord content during the time period observed highlights the place that more identity considerations could take while still fitting into the approach towards in-group and out-group dynamics already seen in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* space. In response to a podcast episode about reconsidering things about childhood and upbringing from an asexual lens, one audience member asks:

> bagel.b: is the talk a real thing white people do? majority of my friends growing up were asian/indian and no one fuckin did that so I feel like it's a pop culture myth ("Podcast talk" chat – Feb. 15, 2023*)*

This mention of "the talk" is a reference to discussions where parents explain sex to their children, as it was discussed in the podcast episode. Like other elements of discussion in these social media channels, this highlights an element of pop culture and its approach to sexuality that may seem universal but that deserves to be challenged as a specific point of view or specific experience not shared by everyone. This example is unique due to its linking of race and ethnicity to the experience being described, and while this post does lead to conversation about individual experiences learning about sex while growing up and reconsidering those memories through a present-day asexual lens, nobody in this conversation takes up bagel.b's offer to discuss the suggestion that this "talk" has a cultural connection to race. Just as when, in the instances where race is discussed in the podcast channel, that discussion and that possibility of new interrogation into identity are not taken up by the social media audience, suggesting a limitation of the power dynamics and discussions of intersectionality within these spaces.

Information about the allosexual outgroup

Centering around the question of how asexuality is made visible and tangible to asexual people, the online community around *Sounds Fake But Okay* also addresses this by assisting and contributing to the definition and construction of "allosexuality" as a comparable outgroup for asexual people. As the basis of the comparison that helps give shape to the in-group, the out-group of any certain social identity is also important to define more precisely for the lens of SIT. With asexuality and this example of asexual media, the name *Sounds Fake But Okay* already hints at this process of developing a language for understanding and describing the outgroup –

they are the ones considering that asexuality is "fake" as opposed to a presumable "non-fake" non-asexuality. Because the project of the media example concerns reversing or otherwise playing with this perception, it would make sense that part of the content found in this space (and created by its fans) would consider the construction and definition of the "not asexual" outgroup, and what it would mean to consider that social identity as "fake." The identification of allosexuality is therefore an important contribution of both the social media and podcast content here. As identified in the *Realization* and *Missing Sexuality* themes, internet users finding asexuality has been a prominent storyline of the orientation's social identity in online spaces. When it comes to the explicit discussion and consideration of labels, languages, and ideas around asexuality, *Sounds Fake But Okay* does offer instances of these tools being used not only to describe experiences of the in-group but to also give descriptions of the out-group that allow for more favorable comparisons. Much of the *Asexuality as a Distinct Perspective* theme details these efforts, offering examples of "allo behavior" and "allo culture" that may be assumed to be "normal" within allosexuality as an In-group, but can be observed and criticized, with identity as a distinct, and not universal, expression of sexual identity.

This use of linguistic tools is what largely defines the "aspec lens" or the "asexual lens" in these spaces. This discourse of establishing traits and characteristics of an allosexual outgroup follows some of the same logic as the development of asexual social identity and its relationship with invisibility and language. The story of *Realization* and the limitations of *Missing Sexuality* as themes highlight the power in taking what was once invisible and giving it a name and a shape and specific tools of language that provide more identifiable boundaries. It follows that giving more precise understandings of "not-asexual" also involves removing the specter "universality" by naming and communicating concrete, identifiable traits. It is, however, this emphasis on the

needs of those generally within the asexual community and the attempts to clarify and outline a non-asexual outgroup that flattens the motivation within this community to discuss facets and other differences between asexual people, leaving intersectionality as a noticeable absence.

Research Question 3

The third and final research question posed in this study asked: What narratives of asexuality and identity are provided by Sounds Fake But Okay in comparison to pre-existing asexual media narratives?

Many of the consistent patterns and themes within the context of asexuality discussion in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast and social media content connect to representations of asexuality found elsewhere in media. The tropes identified within the literature review that characterize modern asexual media include storylines and questions of asexuality that are very much replicated in the *Realization* and *Missing Sexuality* themes identified in the *Sounds Fake But Okay* podcast content. Coming-out stories that depict a person's self-realization of asexuality include prominent media examples like *BoJack Horseman, Emmerdale,* and *Big Mouth*, and the general narrative of these stories is the same processes described in the *Realization* theme. Additionally, the types of relationships asexual people can, can't, will, or won't have is a focus of asexual narratives in all three of these depictions of asexuality, following a general narrative thread of "now that you know you are asexual, what do we do with it?" This same question is the context of much of the *Lack* discussions that aim to articulate asexuality and identify its role in an asexual person's life.

There are some similarities as well between the *Distinct Perspective* theme found with the *Sounds Fake But Okay* content and media depictions that suggest a distance between asexual

people and non-asexual people, and depict the thoughts and perspectives of asexual people to explore that dynamic. These were the characterizing traits of "Sebastion the Asexual Icon," and the death-obsessed "Voodoo" in *Sirens*, and are contexts of the asexual characterization and criticism of Sheldon Cooper and Sherlock Holmes.

In considering this space as a portal for analyses of culture and media, one example that sticks out is the approach to music. A podcast discussion with Kelly Weber identifies this trend, as hosts Kazsyca and Costello reference their ongoing discussion about the unfortunate dominance of romantic and sexual love as a topic of pop songs, and Weber responds by discussing Taylor Swift, whose body of work is described as being "these things that were supposed to be so universal about being, you know, 'a teen girl' and whatever that was supposed to mean. And all of it was really unrelatable because it was just very different from my kind of lived bodily experience." In continuing to discuss music, Weber also identifies the role of media and communication in confronting those assumptions by presenting other languages and storytelling, "I never went through all the universal kind of like breakup experiences, and first love especially like pining over a boy like so unrelatable in so many ways. So, yeah, i''s a challenge to kind of, to I think find those, kind of, examples of like, 'oh hey if you find it very strange and unrelatable hearing about these sorts of experiences, her''s alternatives to that.'" In their social media content, the *Sounds Fake But Okay* hosts and community members have a public music playlist of "non-love songs" that follows up on these ideas in music specifically.

The perspectives of asexual people and the experiences of finding asexuality and incorporating asexuality into their relationships are similar to the types of narratives in media depictions of asexuality, suggesting a "Mainstream Asexuality Narrative," as limited as the examples of these narratives are. The parts of asexuality that these mainstream narratives don't

include but that we can see in this podcast and social media content include: the articulation of non-asexual people as an outgroup population that is not included in media tropes where asexual people are seen as distant from non-asexual people but is a big part of the tone of the "asexual lens" in *Sounds Fake But Okay*; the concept of "positive asexuality"; and the attempt to refine asexual language to deemphasize lack; and self-awareness of overall issues of privilege within asexual communities.

Conclusion: Ace invisibilities of the past, present, and future

The articulation of "asexuality" as a sexual orientation and identity was the first of many steps taken to improve the visibility of asexuality within a social context that would otherwise make it invisible, hidden without other contexts of nonsexuality such as celibacy and sexual disorders. Since this point in the early 2000s, invisibility has been a chief concern for asexual advocates and activists wishing to make a cultural world more open and accepting to their presence. This effort, then, requires a definition of asexuality that can be understood and spread in a cultural scare. For these purposes, the "lack of sexual attraction" definition serves as the tool for gaining widespread recognition of asexuality as a sexual identity.

However, this definition itself leads to other invisibilities of the asexual experience. Because the definition centers so strongly on situations where sexual attraction would be expected but is otherwise not present, these situations and contexts define how and when asexuality makes itself known through a visible absence. Interview research on asexual people indicates that asexual identity remains invisible and without impact on their lives outside of contexts of sexuality, romance, and the process of self-identification (Rothblum, Heimann, and Carpenter, 2018). Additionally, the spread of asexuality as a definition does not consistently

result in the understanding or acknowledgement of an "asexual person" as a valid identity, Instead, it can lead those learning about the orientation to consider that it "sounds fake."

Asexual media, in providing an opportunity to offer expressions and depictions of asexual people, is a space where this invisibility of asexual social identity can be challenged and a present asexual social identity can be offered. While much of the asexual media that exists in television and internet contexts centers on detailing or providing information about the process of self-identification and the implications of asexuality on an asexual person's relationships, asexual media such as the podcast *Sounds Fake But Okay* and its social media fandom offer different depictions of asexual identity.

Within these spaces, asexuality is suggested to be a space of a distinct perspective on cultural norms, where the assumptions of universal sexuality and norms of gender, identity, and relationships can be challenged in both playfully antagonistic and critical ways. A person's relationship to asexuality is therefore not solely their relationship to sexual situations and contexts, but their position related to this perspective – how it is they see, move, and act on the world from this place of possible deconstruction. In the podcast content and audience reaction to *Sounds Fake But Okay*, we see this most notably expressed as the construction of allosexuality as an outgroup or asexuality. With this construction, "sexuality" is removed conceptually from the assumed universal status of humanity, and placed alongside other variations of human sexuality laid out for all individuals to navigate and explore. In expanding this definition, asexuality can then be a lens throughout which other assumed norms and power dynamics of society can be, playfully or critically, investigated and challenged, suggesting a future for the orientation and social identity that fulfills possibilities of radicalism suggested by queer theorists such as DeLuzio Chasin (2013).

In the construction of this asexual lens in *Sounds Fake But Okay*, the identity category of gender, its intersectionality with asexuality, and the assumptions of normalcy found without cultural approaches to masculinity and femininity are explicitly explored as crucial to this perspective. However, the *Sounds Fake But Okay* content also outlines where there are still unobserved invisibilities of identity. Race, class, and disability – all identity categories suggested by asexualities research as valuable intersections and frames of analysis for asexuality and the power dynamics identity – are observed only as the presence of those outside of the norm threaten conflicting perspectives and require the management of community relations within various identity groups of asexual people. The lens does not turn to Whiteness, upper-class status, or able-bodied status as it turns to gender and allosexuality. There are still invisibilities unexamined.

Future Research

Future questions for the social identity of asexuality and of asexual media from these conclusions and interpretations can consider how approaches to asexual invisibility by asexual people and media creators translates into an investigative and critical perspective aimed at other cultural invisibilities. The tone, tenor, and execution of this perspective are also relevant categories for future study. As a podcast steeped in casual and informative internet discourse, *Sounds Fake But Okay* communicates this perspective in ways both playful and education-focused, while other contexts of asexuality may involve different approaches. As asexual media grows, attention paid to media work done by asexual people of more varied genders, races, class statuses, and disabled status will be especially noteworthy in their interpretations or presentation of asexual social identity, perspective, and criticism.

Appendix

Sounds Fake But Okay episode references

Ep. #	Title (Guest)	Guest	Publication Date
240	Kink, BDSM, and Asexuality	Evie Lupine	12/4/2022
241	Same Podcast, One Year Apart (The Third Year)		12/11/2022
242	Catfishing		1/8/2023
243	Signs We Were Aspec		1/15/2023
244	Amatonormativity in Small Talk		1/22/2023
245	Nudity in Art		1/29/2023
246	Taking Up Space as an Aspec		2/5/2023
247	Thinking About Sex & Romance (Or Not)		2/12/2023
248	Sounds Fake But Okay Book Preview!		2/19/2023
249	The TikTok Algorithm		2/26/2023
250	Alcohol Consumption & Aspecs		3/5/2023
251	Trans Rights		3/12/2023
252	Sex and Romance Mad Libs		3/19/2023
253	What's In and What's Out?		3/26/2023
254	Ace Notes	Michele Kirichanskaya	4/2/2023
255	We Are Changed to Deer at the Broken Place	Kelly Weber	4/9/2023
256	I Have Beef With the Moon		4/16/2023
257	The Friendship Recession		4/23/2023
258	Am I The Asshole? pt. 4		4/30/2023
259	Asking ChatGPT About Asexuality and Aromanticism		5/7/2023
260	Microlabels Pt. 2		5/21/2023
261	Aces in Racing	Michael Klein	5/28/2023

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

Ph.D., Mass Communications, Syracuse University
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications — June 2024
Dissertation: Ace Invisibilities: Asexual Social Identity Through Podcasting And Digital Media
Advisor: Carol Liebler

M.A., Media Studies, Syracuse University
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications — 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
Journalism Studies

PUBLICATIONS

Book Chapter

Webster, K. (2022). A Textual Analysis of Asexuality on Reddit. In Lipschultz, J. H., Freberg, K. & Luttrell, R., (eds.), *The Emerald Handbook of Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Media*, Emerald Publishing Group.

Journal Article

Buntain, N., Liebler, C., & **Webster, K.** (2023). Database use, database discrepancies: Implications for content analysis of news. *Newspaper Research Journal*, https://doi-org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/10.1177/07395329231155193

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. 2020 ICA Convention, held virtually.

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. 2020 WSCA Convention, Denver, CO.

Liebler, C., Buntain, N, **Webster, K.** (2020). Database discrepancies: News stories and child separation. 2020 AEJMC Convention, held virtually.

EXPERIENCE

School of Communication and the Arts, Marist College

Visiting Instructor August 2023 – Present

- Currently working as a visiting instructor in the Communications department at the School of Communication and the Arts in Marist College teaching a 4/4 schedule of undergraduate courses within various communication specializations offered in the school.
- Classes taught include Communications Research Methods, an undergraduate course introducing students to common designs of communication research, and Introduction to Strategic Advertising, the first class within the school's advertising specialization.
- Tasks involve adapting and refining the syllabus and class topics, preparing and leading class sessions, holding consistent virtual and in-person office hours, and providing students timely grading and feedback for their written work.

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

Teaching Experience August 2021 – May 2023

- Served as an instructor of record for two undergraduate classes at the Newhouse School: Communications and Society in the Information Age, and Fake News, Real News: Literacy in the Information Age.

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 on marginalization, cultural invisibility, and symbolic annihilation.

Instructional Associate August 2018 – May 2022

- Acted as an associate in the teaching of three semesters of Advertising and Public Relations and one semester of Beyoncé and the Evolving Politics of Identity at the Newhouse School. Graded various exams & assignments and assisted in other tasks to organize and run class.