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# INTERESTED, BUT NOT IN SEX:
# ANALYSIS AND THEORY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANTIC ATTRACTION IN UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF ASEXUAL POPULATIONS

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By

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# INTERESTED, BUT NOT IN SEX:
# ANALYSIS AND THEORY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANTIC ATTRACTION IN UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF ASEXUAL POPULATIONS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract:

The research of asexuality, which refers to a feeling of no sexual attraction towards others, has rapidly expanded in recent years to reconsider the foundational elements of attraction. Within the last few years, differentiations between sexual attractions and romantic attractions have become recognized and have increasingly become a standard consideration in such research. This dissertation contributes to this understanding by constructing Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 as qualitative research articles. Each of these will draw from a qualitative dataset of 21 in-depth interviews with participants who identify on the asexual-spectrum of identities. While the sexual attraction of participants ranged from low-to-no attraction, romantic attraction was more varied. This provided for a good comparison of the lived experience of the participants based on romantic attraction. Results from this research further found several points where this differentiation between sexual and romantic attractions was highly relevant for understanding the lived experiences of asexual-spectrum individuals. Feelings of camaraderie with non-asexual peers on topics of dating and feelings of positive affect towards one's own sexual identity each appeared to vary by romantic identity. Further, the findings of these studies provide possible answers to questions posed by previous research by giving evidence to how asexual individuals may perceive romantic relationships differently from non-asexual populations. It further examines how asexual individuals may perceive dating or marriage on both a level of personal importance, such as comparing the importance of romantic relationships against friendship relationships, and on a level of its social importance, the purpose of romantic relationships as a means to be "normal" by common social standards. Chapter 4 constructs a theoretical model, the Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model, which builds on the current understandings of the differentiations between sexual attraction and romantic attraction to further

account for inconsistencies in the current usage of sexual and romantic identities. In particular, this model will examine sexual identities as potentially bifurcated descriptors, some of which refer to directionality of attractions (e.g., heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual) and some of which indicate intensities of feeling (e.g., many asexual-spectrum identities such as gray-sexual, which notes low-or-infrequent attraction but does not note directionality of attraction). This model gives an answer to a common tendency that has largely existed in asexual research, where individuals note multiple sexual identities and multiple romantic identities, and further works toward a goal of applying considerations of differentiated attraction to non-asexual populations. Overall, these chapters contribute to the growing body of academic literature on asexuality and on understanding romantic attraction as an important concept in understanding the sexual and romantic feelings of a population.

# Chapter 1: Introduction and Dissertation Overview

The goal of this dissertation is to broaden our understanding of asexuality with qualitative research and to further the consideration of sexual attraction and romantic attraction as potentially separate factors. The current field of research regarding asexuality has been moving quickly as researchers reevaluate even foundational assumptions on how sexual attraction manifests. To give a notion of the speed with which this particular area of academia has been moving, asexuality has moved from functionally being a non-concept in academia in most historical models of sexuality before the Storms Model (Storms 1980), to having its first major community website and social hub be made in 2001 with the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). It has further moved from being debated as a paraphilia (Brotto and Yule 2017; Yule, Brotto, and Gorzalka 2017) or a sexual desire disorder to be resolved with injections of testosterone (Bogaert 2015b; Gupta 2017b), to putting forward new understandings of the fundamental elements of sexual and romantic attraction (Sennkestra 2020; Winer 2024a). Within this rapid pace of new discoveries and developments, the findings of this dissertation bring substantial contributions to the field.

## Key Concepts

As much of the current knowledge around asexuality research is quickly expanding and is not commonly considered outside of asexuality literature, it is prudent to give a quick primer on key concepts and information relevant to the content of this dissertation.

### *Asexuality: Basic Definition and Demographics of the Population*

Asexuality is typically defined as not feeling sexual attraction towards others, but there are numerous caveats which are often only briefly noted in academic research. Van Houdenhove et

al. (2015a) wrote a key piece on the topic which broke asexuality down into feelings (e.g., feeling sexual attraction), behaviors (e.g., abstaining from or not seeking sexual activity), and self-identification (e.g., identifying as asexual); their work included some survey data that suggested that self-identification was seen as the most important indicator by the asexual population, attraction being closely second, and behavior was seen as the least important by a large margin. In general, self-identification as asexual is used as the standard indicator in academic research. This is generally agreed to be the best option, though it has also been noted as potentially being a source of concern as being counted as asexual requires both knowledge of asexuality and the adoption of such an identity. Different demographic populations have likely adopted self-identification as asexual at different rates. White populations, in particular, have been notably overrepresented in online communities (Gupta 2017a) and academic research (Guz et al. 2022). The reasons are not fully understood, but contributing factors likely include a tendency in the major asexual online spaces, such as AVEN, to have a reputation for being "Cliquey" (Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell 2018:385) and for there to be a culture which centralizes a 'gold star asexual' image to the extent of being largely dismissive of variations in experiences based on race or ability (Cuthbert 2017; Owens 2016). This is an area where research is still scarce and, as a result, there have been several calls for additional focus on the intersectionality of asexual experiences (Guz et al. 2022).

As for what percentage of the general population is asexual, such a question has caused a great deal of frustration among asexuality researchers because we do not have a good answer. The short answer is that it is difficult to estimate, in part because of the above paragraph's noted complications and in part because finding a large, general-population survey which included asexuality as an option for sexual preference has been troublesome (Winer 2024b). The most

commonly cited percentage is that 1% of the general population is asexual (Bogaert (2004), but that percentage came from people who reported not feeling sexual attraction and did not come from people who self-identified as asexual. A later number that has been cited in a few papers came from Rothblum et al. (2020), who found 1.66% of the population to be asexual. However, there is a critical flaw with how this has been cited in the literature which has not always been acknowledged. The dataset used for that number was the *Generations* study, which is a large but LGB-exclusive dataset. Using that logic would suggest that the asexual population is not 1.66% of the general population, but instead only 1.66% of the LGB population. That number itself is likely far off the mark. First, the asexual population being only 1.66% the size of the LGB population seems wildly too low of an estimate. Second, there has been evidence that asexual individuals may not answer such a study as they are less likely to feel like they belong to LGB groups when compared to other LGB+ individuals (Dawson et al. 2018; Worthen and Laljer 2021). Regardless, 1% is commonly used as a conservative estimate in modern research as we do not currently have a better estimation.

Of the asexual population, the population is largely around 70% assigned female at birth and 30% assigned male at birth (Ace Community Survey Team 2023). Gender identity variation is more distinct, as upwards of 40% of asexual individuals identify with a transgender or nonbinary gender identity and over 20% percentage of asexual-spectrum individuals identify with a nonbinary gender (Ace Community Survey Team 2023; Hinderliter 2009; Rothblum et al. 2020). The high number of nonbinary-identified individuals is an acknowledged tendency in the population, with the reasoning being that, as asexual individuals may have less interest in dating or sex, they may also be less likely to invest into concepts of masculinity or femininity (Cuthbert 2019).

### *Asexual, Asexual-Spectrum, Ace-Spec, the Asexual Umbrella*

Asexuality (commonly shortened to ace), in its strict usage, is the previously noted definition of having zero feelings of sexual attraction; however, the term has also taken on a more colloquial usage to refer to any low-to-no sexual attraction definition. Setting aside the colloquial usage, academics in the field have generally kept to using asexuality to refer specifically to the zero-attraction definition and have used other community terms, such as asexual-spectrum (commonly shortened to ace-spec) and the asexual umbrella, to refer to the collection of sexual identifications including asexuality and other low-attraction sexualities.

To give brief definitions on the common variations of low-attraction sexualities, demisexual (demi) refers to only developing feelings of sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed and gray-asexual (also commonly called graysexual or gray-ace) refers to having sexual attraction only in rare circumstances or at low intensities. Plenty of other terms have been developed, but such terms are much more rare and will be noted in this text only when they are relevant. All definitions for attraction-related terms used in this dissertation are included in “Index A: Term Definitions” for future reference.

A counterpart to asexuality is allosexuality, which is generally defined as being not asexual or as experiencing sexual attraction. This definition has been a bit blurry historically, as there has been mixed usage and a touch of confusion with the term. The core problem is that if the term is defined strictly as “not asexual” then other asexual-spectrum identities, such as demisexuality and gray-sexuality, should be included as forms of allosexuality. This is not typically how the term is used. As such, there is a common contradiction in usage. Allosexuality is often defined as “not asexual” but is typically used as if the term meant “not asexual-spectrum.” In practice, this does not tend to cause notable problems in academia and it is

typically safe to understand allosexuality as being defined as the more general "not asexual-spectrum" in academic literature. Allosexuality will be used as a synonym for "not asexual-spectrum" in this dissertation.

### *Differentiated Attraction and the Split Attraction Model*

One of the key concepts to come out of asexuality research is that of differentiated attraction (Sennkestra 2020). This concept refers to how different attractions, such as sexual attraction and romantic attraction, can exist apart from each other. This understanding means that attraction to romantic activities can be separated from attraction to sex. For definitions and identification purposes, "-romantic" identities are typically worded as counterparts to "-sexual" identities: asexual compares to aromantic, allosexual compares to alloromantic, etc. Differentiated attraction, in practice, can be seen with a common example of a person who is asexual (feels no sexual attraction) but is still alloromantic (feels romantic attraction). Such a person may still have incentive to date, marry, and still seek or enjoy whatever activities are defined as "romantic" to them, even if sex itself is not perceived as attractive. Notably, while knowledge of this separation between sexual and romantic attractions may be rare in the general population, it is extremely common in the asexual community, with estimates suggesting upwards of 90% of the population having knowledge of it (Ace Community Survey Team 2023).

Other forms of potentially differentiated attractions also exist. Two common examples are "aesthetic" attraction and "sensual" attraction, which respectively refer to feeling attraction based on physical appearance of others and feeling attraction for touch-based activities (common examples being hugging, cuddling, or kissing). Attractions outside of sexual and romantic have generally only had passing mention in asexuality research, and there is no notable academic

article which focuses on them that has been published to date. As such, attractions beyond sexual and romantic mostly exist in the abstract and as minor references in academic work.

A core aspect of differentiated attraction is that attractions are not guaranteed to be differentiated for all individuals. In other words, sexual, romantic, and other attractions *may* be differentiated for anyone, but it is assumed that it is not differentiated for everyone. In many ways, this works well to simplify the conceptualization for common use. There are theoretically infinite kinds of attraction and therefore attraction could be split into similarly infinite dimensions using this understanding; however, only one or two dimensions are typically ever used by individuals, and any unstated dimensions are commonly assumed to be not differentiated for the individual.

Another aspect to note with regard to differentiated attraction is the Split Attraction Model, largely because both are used casually and academically to refer to very similar concepts. The difference was broken down by asexual blogger and community theorist Sennkestra (2020), whose article is commonly cited in academic works on the topic. There has also been some history noted with the term Split Attraction Theory being originally used by anti-ace trolls for the purposes of online harassment of asexual individuals and identities (Coyote 2019a). Though modern usage does not tend to reflect such notions, it is partly for this reason that scholars in the field, including myself, tend to prefer the term differentiated attraction. That stated, the history of Split Attraction Theory having derogatory origins has been questioned by academics (Winer 2024a). In either case, the end result does not tend to make a large difference. Both differentiated attraction and the Split Attraction Model refer to attractions being either “Split” or “Differentiated,” to very similar ends. Both are used casually in the asexual community and both

are used in academia. The differences have become largely semantic, and it is reasonable to consider them synonyms in most cases.

**Brief Chapter Overviews**

The substantive chapters of this dissertation are presented as individual academic articles. For Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, which are designed to be research articles, each presents the individual components that may be expected of such an article. As these are written to exist as separate articles, there is some repetition in regard to explaining asexuality-related concepts and in regard to explaining methodological procedures used in the research of this dissertation. Chapter 4 is designed as a theory-crafting piece which puts forth a new model to understand attraction. This development of chapters as individual articles is in accordance with accepted options for dissertations at the University of Oklahoma Department of Sociology and is intended to ease publication of findings after dissertation completion.

Chapter 2 will add notable evidence to the growing theoretical consensus that sexuality should not be considered the sole arbiter for describing feelings of attraction. In particular, this chapter will use qualitative data to expand current understandings by comparing the experiences of sexual attraction and romantic attractions for asexual-spectrum individuals. Several findings are noted, including a trend for aromantic individuals to note more relief than alloromantic individuals upon learning the terminology for their identities, and how asexual individuals with higher levels of romantic attraction appeared to experience more dating-related common ground with allosexual peers.

Chapter 3 will build on Chapter 2's focus on understanding attraction and consider how experiences and pairing behaviors of individuals may vary in accordance with romantic

attraction. The findings were centered on three themes, including variations in the understanding and perception of romantic relationships, the reported valuations of romance compared to other forms of relationships (e.g., friendships), and the manufacturing of crushes as a means to be "normal."

Chapter 4 considers the findings of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, then builds on the current theories of differentiated attraction to construct a new theoretical model, the Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model, which can address weaknesses of the current understandings of attraction and moves toward applying theories of attraction to a broader population.

# Chapter 2: "I Thought it was Made Up, Literally": Evidence of the Importance of Romantic Attraction in the Development of Sexual Identity for Asexual Individuals

Abstract

The conflation between sexual attraction and romantic attraction in relationships is a common one, yet evidence shows that sexual attraction and romantic attraction can exist separately and independently from one another. Public narratives and media rarely note that such a separation can exist and, in academia, even high-quality research into various LGB+ identities rarely differentiates the concepts. The growing exception to that trend is asexuality research which, informed by the developing culture around asexuality, has been differentiating the two concepts and questioning the basic cultural assumptions surrounding the connectedness between sexual and romantic attraction. My research seeks to increase our collective knowledge on the importance of sexual and romantic attraction as separate concepts among asexual individuals. The research included in-depth interviews with 21 individuals who identified across the asexual spectrum (e.g., asexual, demisexual, gray-a) and who identified with varying levels of romantic attractions (e.g., alloromantic, aromantic, demiromantic). Findings suggested that, for those who identify as on the asexual spectrum, romantic identification is more important than specific sexual identification in affecting an individual's lived experiences and self-perceptions of their sexual and romantic identity. This research furthers our understanding of the importance of the conceptual and practical differences between romantic and sexual identities.

Keywords: asexuality, LGBTQ+ identity, romantic attraction, sexuality

## Introduction

Asexuality is generally understood to refer to having no feelings of sexual attraction and is often used as an umbrella term, alongside terms such as asexual-spectrum, to refer to a variety of sexualities that are described by having little-to-no sexual attraction. However, an increasing number of researchers have noted that asexual-spectrum individuals appear to be highly heterogenous in their identifications and experiences (e.g., Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2015; Scherrer 2008; Winer et al. 2024). Two common points of diversity are: (1) in specific sexual identification to indicate intensity, frequency, or contextuality of sexual attraction (e.g., asexual, gray-asexual, demisexual) and (2) romantic attraction that is differentiated from sexual attraction, including identifications referring to no or low romantic attraction (e.g., aromantic, demiromantic) or perceiving oneself to have a more conventional level of romantic attraction disconnected from sexual activity (alloromantic or non-aromantic). This differentiation has been noted both by the collective asexual community (see: Sennkestra 2020) and by researchers as a less often considered but important area in need of additional research (Antonsen et al. 2020; Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022). Within the asexual population, around 42% of asexual individuals identify with an identity under the aromantic umbrella (Ace Community Survey Team 2023). Despite this, aromanticism has gone largely unresearched until recently in academia. This may be because society commonly conflates sexual and romantic attraction; even within academia, assumptions that intimacy is inherently both romantic and sexual are commonplace (Hammack, Frost, and Hughes 2019).

Findings from previous research have indicated that asexual individuals may experience conflict due to their romantic interests when dating or befriending allosexual (non-asexual) people due to differences in what is desired in a relationship (Scherrer 2010; Vares 2018).

Further, there is evidence that asexual populations may perceive romance differently from other populations (Mitchell and Hunnicutt 2019) or have different desires for relationships based on whether they identify as asexual, demisexual, or gray-asexual (Copulsky and Hammack 2023). However, previous researchers have typically utilized quantitative or qualitative data from content analysis of online posts to explore differences in romantic attraction relative to sexual attraction (Antonsen et al. 2020; Winer et al. 2024). There are few studies that have utilized interviews to investigate variations in romantic attraction among asexual populations. With that in mind, my research expands on this burgeoning area through qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of asexual-spectrum participants (N = 21) using in-depth interviews that specifically focus on their self-identified sexual and romantic identities.

## Literature Review

### *Definitions of Asexuality Sexual and Romantic Attraction*

Terms for each sexual and romantic identity noted in this article can be found in the Index, but it is important to note that the definition of asexuality has shifted over time. For example, early Western sexologists labeled a lack of "sexual instinct" as "Anæsthesia Sexualis" (Krafft-Ebing and Chaddock 1893:42), which the authors further claimed was universally connected to having cerebral disturbances and states of physical and mental degeneration. Half a century later, Kinsey et al.'s research denoted a lack of sexual attraction as "X" as a means of indicating a no socio-sexual contacts (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948). Later works defined asexuality as having no attraction towards "either sex" (Bogaert 2004:279). The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which often serves as a source of information and communication for the asexual community, uses a similar definition before giving note of terms

such as ‘ace-spectrum’ to indicate the larger umbrella of sexual identifications associated with little-to-no feeling of sexual attraction. Common among these definitions is demisexual (only having sexual attraction after an emotional bond has already been established) and gray-asexual/graysexual (only feeling sexual attraction in rare instances or with low intensity). The counterpart to these terms is “allosexual,” which refers to feeling sexual attraction. Researchers have often adopted similar definitions for research (Carrigan 2011). While there have been efforts to construct measures examining lack of sexual attraction (e.g., Yule, Brotto, and Gorzalka 2015) and theoretical models examining the behavioral, attraction, and identification-related aspects of asexuality (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015a), self-identification remains a core requirement to determine asexuality in research (Carrigan 2011).

1% of the British population reported not experiencing sexual attraction in early 2000s (Bogaert 2004), and that percentage has been used as a rough estimate for the overall asexual population. In regards to sex assigned at birth, the majority of this population is assigned female at birth; however, it should be noted that diversity in self-identified gender identity is common in this population, with over 20% of individuals identifying with a nonbinary gender (Ace Community Survey Team 2023; Hinderliter 2009; Rothblum et al. 2020).

### *Differentiated Attraction and Definitions of Romantic Attraction*

The asexual population is a highly heterogenous population, with substantial variation in regard to significant identifications and associated experiences (Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2015; Clark and Zimmerman 2022; Scherrer 2008). One tendency that has shown up in research and in the asexual community is for any single individual to experience multiple forms of attraction, with the most common differentiation being the separation of sexual attraction from romantic attraction, but other kinds have been noted such as aesthetic and sensual attractions. This

tendency was previously and loosely called the “Split Attraction Model” (Coyote 2019a), but has been relabeled “Differentiated Attraction” by the ace community as people refined the concept and worked to separate the concept from its roots as an insult to asexual people (Coyote 2019b; Sennkestra 2020). In either case, this differentiation between sexual and romantic attraction coincides with researchers’ findings that romantic attraction can be an experience different from sexual attraction (Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022; Diamond 2003). Though the differentiation between sexual and romantic attraction is not noted as a universal experience (Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022), it has been found to be a significant variable in quantitative research of asexual populations (Antonsen et al. 2020; Winer et al. 2024). Definitions for romantic identities tend to mirror those of sexual identities. For example, aromantic (no romantic attraction), demiromantic (romantic feelings can occur after an emotional bond is already established), and alloromantic (feeling romantic attraction) are common definitions. Other labels exist but, as these labels are highly heterogeneous, this research will focus on the main definitions of romantic attractions.

### *Societal Constructions Centered on Sexual and Romantic Bonding*

When examining the development of asexual or aromantic identities, it is important to recognize how those who display little to no interest in sexual activity are perceived. Several theorists have argued that there are sexual expectations woven in all aspects of society (Przybylo 2011) and that all people face expectations of being sexual (Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2011). This compulsory sexuality has been argued to be a means of social control through society’s expectations that each person should desire subjects and construct themselves as objects of desire (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015). Those who do not match these expectations are punished or ostracized for perceived violations of norms. Dating norms centered on sexual activity, romantic subplots in TV series, and advertisements that connect sexuality to objects or places can each act

as a means of indicating the value of sexuality and reinforce this tendency. Social expectations of family, marriage, and pairing rituals also frequently center on the presence of romantic and sexual activity, with romantic love being considered a standard reason for such bonds between adults in modern, western societies (Coontz 2006). Further, there is the assumption that such sexual relationships should take priority over nonsexual relationships, a trend labeled amatonormativity by previous research (Brake 2012).

These standards can further be gendered. Sexual activity is often presented as a fundamental tenet or measure of masculinity, which can leave asexual men facing doubts regarding their asexuality due to social expectations that all men desire sex (MacNeela and Murphy 2015; Mitchell and Hunnicutt 2019; Robbins, Low, and Query 2016; Vares 2018). However, men are typically able to more easily avoid sexual expectations in social situations through adoption of labels of nonsexual archetypes such as nerd or scientist (Gupta 2019). On the other hand, asexual women may face assumptions that they may be either too sexually immature to understand, will grow out of their asexuality, or could be 'converted' to being sexual by virile heterosexual men. Notably, this dismissal of nonsexuality has also appeared in many LGB+ communities through assumptions that asexual people were only identifying as asexual because they hesitated to accept another sexuality such as being gay or lesbian (Gupta 2017a; Robbins et al. 2016). Regardless of the source, male-bodied individuals tend to be more likely to be assumed to seek sexuality by society, while female-bodied individuals tend to struggle more in gaining recognition for their sexual autonomy.

### *Presentations of Non-Sexuality in Society*

Social and cultural norms typically dictate what terms and options are presented to members of a culture, as well as whether or not any options are seen as valid, welcomed, or

stigmatized. In this case, asexuality has a muddled history. There has been a noted conflation between the lack of sexual attraction found in asexual individuals and that of people who have experienced some kind of medical condition or sexual trauma (Bogaert 2015b; Brotto and Yule 2017; Brotto, Yule, and Gorzalka 2015). When presented through this lens, society has been historically likely to present asexuality as a flaw, condition, or otherwise something broken. There is also evidence that people without asexual acquaintances are more likely to view asexual people as robotic or otherwise non-human (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). These social norms, in conjunction with compulsory sexuality, influence the social context that asexual individuals grow up in. Asexual individuals have commonly reported having difficulties in learning about asexuality in their youth due to lack of knowledge about asexuality in the general public (Gupta 2017a). This may cause many asexual individuals to initially identify with another LGB+ identity, such as bisexual or pansexual, before later self-identifying as asexual (Winer et al. 2024). This tendency can come from asexual individuals comparing their (very low or nonexistent) interest in male-bodied and female-bodied individuals around them and perceiving the attractions as roughly equal. As the two are perceived as equal, the individual may equate that feeling to being bisexual. Once provided with definitions that more accurately fit their experiences, the self-identification of the asexual individual may change.

The friction that can arise from asexual individuals and their social environment can lead to psychological consequences. Psychological distress has been correlated to asexuality and research has suggested the effect is due to asexuality being frequently misunderstood by the general public (Su and Zheng 2021). Asexual populations tend to also have higher rates of depression on average when compared to heterosexual, gay, and lesbian groups but have rates roughly equal to bisexual groups (Borgogna et al. 2019). While such effects have been noted for

asexuality, the effect of romantic attraction on mental health or psychological distress is currently unresearched. As such, while it is likely that similar mental strains may occur among those who identify on the aromantic spectrum, the intensity or frequency to which such phenomena exist is unknown.

## Current Study

Bringing these ideas together, the current study examines differences in the lived experiences of asexual-spectrum individuals across both sexual and romantic identifications using qualitative interview data. To facilitate this analysis, the following research questions are examined:

> Research question #1: How do sexual identifications compare to romantic identifications in regard to relevancy to the asexual-spectrum individuals' perception of identity?
>
> Research question #2: How do sexual and romantic identities each affect perceptions of romantic and sexual activity for the asexual-spectrum individual?
>
> Research question #3: How does learning about one's sexual or romantic identity differ for those asexual-spectrum individuals with different sexual and romantic identities?

## Methodology

Data were gathered from individuals who responded to an initial survey requesting asexual participants. A recruitment message (see Appendix B) was posted on Twitter and a Discord channel catering to asexual students and scholars in the academic community. The link was shared over Twitter by several asexual groups and members of the community. A total of 443 individuals responded to the initial survey, which was much higher than anticipated. After the initial survey, which consisted of basic background information, the participants were separated

into groups by sex assigned at birth and feelings toward sexual activity such as being sex-averse, sex-neutral, or sex-positive as noted by Carrigan (2011). While such research has considered this trait important to research, participants later noted during interviews that their feelings were more complicated than may be expressed with such categorizations and several responded differently when given the opportunity to explain their experiences. Regardless, this led to six categorizations which included three groups (sex-averse, sex-neutral, and sex-positive participants) each further divided by two groups (participants assigned male or female at birth). Within each of the categorizations, roughly equal numbers of respondents were chosen at random using a random number generator and invited to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview.[1]

A total of 21 interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted over ZOOM with audio and video recording, with interviews lasting from 45 minutes to 140 minutes. Once the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and conducted two waves of coding. The first wave included descriptive coding using a Social Constructionist paradigm and focused on how participants learned about, viewed, and engaged with understandings of sexual and romantic attraction. This was coded for instances in both how the participant perceived their own identity, sexuality, or self, and how the participant perceived the actions, expectations, and norms of the people around them. The second wave of coding was analytical and guided by the research questions in order to identify commonalities between the experiences of participants and trends in the effect of events relevant to the research questions, such as effects of a participant of learning terminology associated with asexuality. Participant characteristics are included in Table 1.

[1] Analysis of data categorizations using the traits of sex-averse, sex-neutral, and sex-positive traits did not appear to affect or correspond with other any responses during the interview portion of data collection.

<Insert Table 1>

While only ten of the participants reported being cisgender (i.e. not transgender or nonbinary) may appear quite low, previous research has noted that asexual populations have notably higher rates of identifying with nonbinary gender or agender (i.e. identifying as not having a gender) identities relative to other populations (Gupta 2019). It is also important to note that self-labels of sexuality and romantic attraction were often described as feeling vague and as a result, some participants used different labels from those they listed in the survey during the interview portions of the data collection. This tendency will be discussed as part of the results. The interview questions are included in Appendix C.

Participants provided electronic consent during the survey portion of data collection and provided oral consent during the interview phase of data collection to participate in the research for the purposes of publication. Transcripts were de-identified by changing names of all participants and removing any information, such as specific location names, which was specific enough to be used to directly link the transcript to specific individuals. Recordings were deleted after transcriptions. As an incentive for participation in interviews, individuals were placed into a raffle for one of four $25 Amazon Gift Cards. The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Oklahoma approved the data collection for this research (IRB Number: 14679) on June 23, 2022.

## Results

There were three major themes that arose in the data relevant to the research questions: (1) specific asexual identity on the asexual spectrum was often noted as including a sense of vagueness, with several participants noting that generalized terms such as ‘ace-spectrum’ were

more satisfactory for their own understanding of their identity, (2) those who identified as aromantic noted having an additional layer of disconnection when recalling how they understood relationship experiences relative to peers in high school and college, and (3) those who identified as aromantic, compared to non-aromantic participants, viewed their sexual and romantic identities with more positive affect and noted learning about their identity as having a more positive effect on their lived experience. These themes are further discussed below.

### *Asexuality-related definitions as unclear or lacking personal importance*

When given the time to fully describe and explain their sexuality, the definitions and importance of those definitions varied widely between participants. Of the 21 participants, eleven identified as clearly asexual and three as clearly demisexual. Of these participants, several noted their sexuality as simply "Asexual" without further need to explain while some added minor notes on how they had identified earlier in their lives. For the remaining seven participants, when given room to provide a more complete definition, several participants explained either a vagueness of their experiences or noted that they did not cleanly identify with any specific definition and kept to a more generalized term such as "Ace-spectrum" or "Queer": For example, Stephen [asexual, aegoromantic/aro-spec] indicated:

> I identify as asexual. I did for a while identify as demisexual, but through further reflection, found the umbrella term asexual more comfortable for me.

Similarly, Kate [gray-asexual, queer/questioning] indicated:

> I tend to not label it in general, I avoid conversations that require me to label myself in general. But if I were to put a label on it, I would I usually just say queer, or if we want to get more specific, I would say asexual, but usually people ask me, I say queer.

This phrasing suggests that use of a specific identity is felt to be either unimportant or too specific to feel accurate to the experiences of the participants. This also suggests that, for these

participants, the umbrella term appeared to be a more comfortable term that better suited their experience of their sexual identity. Identifying as a form of asexual-spectrum identity was important to these participants, but attempting to narrow down or pinpoint their definition to a specific sexual identity on the asexual spectrum was not desirable.

Some participants further noted that their preference for the general term over the specific term was due to the nuances regarding terms such as 'demisexual' and 'asexual.' As Jay [asexual/ace-spec, aromantic] stated:

> I've definitely been on the fence of straight asexuality and demi-. For a very long time, *I still haven't ever found anybody that would define me as Demi-*, but I still kind of have it as an open idea. Most of the time, I just use asexual and call it good. [emphasis by researcher]

This statement notes the necessity of an external factor to establish differences between asexuality and similar definitions like demisexuality or gray-asexuality. Demisexuality refers to having sexual attraction after a relationship has been established; however, such sexual attraction is not guaranteed in any relationship. As such, Jay found it difficult to prove that they were asexual and not demisexual as such a certainty would require proof of a negative: proof that they could never be sexually attracted to anyone. But to be clear, this hesitance was not universal and most participants who self-identified as asexual, rather than demi- or another definition, did so with confidence.

Another tendency was for the terminology to be just an descriptor rather than an identity that the participant had an emotional investment in. As Caroline [asexual/queer, biromantic] explained it:

> At this point, asexuality and bisexuality, they're useful ways to contextualize my experiences. But in a lot of ways, they don't really change my day-to-day, they just describe it

Caroline's statement appears to coincide with a tendency noted by previous research, where asexual individuals have little investment in their sexual identity (Dawson et al. 2018). In this interview, Caroline further noted that she explains her sexuality to others as "queer" largely to signify that she was not a cisgender, straight, or allosexual person. The identity of asexuality for Caroline appeared to be less important than the knowledge that she does not need to be sexual or feel sexual attraction.

With these responses noted, differences in the lived experiences for participants who identified as asexual, demisexual, or with a variant of an asexual-spectrum did not appear to differ from each other strongly when compared to the distinct differences noted across variations of romantic attraction.

### *Romantic Identity and Previous Perceptions of Dating and Sex*

Aromantic and non-aromantic participants shared a number of similarities in their perceptions of sex and the expectations surrounding sexual activity in certain areas. Common between both groups, participants recalled a gap in their perception and those of their friends on the topic of sexuality during their teenage years, with participants noting feelings ranging from disbelief to suspecting something was wrong with themselves. For example, Denise [demi-/ace-spec, demi-/gray-aro-spec] stated on the topic of people at her school having sex:

> I thought it was made up, literally. Thought it was one of those things that existed in movies. Like everyone thought everyone else was doing it, so everyone's talking about it but it's not actually happening. Like, I knew people were doing drugs because the guy in the locker next to mine was selling them out of his locker. But like, sex? No.

This experience appeared to come from a fundamental disconnection to understanding sex as a desirable or sought-after activity by anyone. Two participants noted believing that their friends were fully lying about sex or showed this style of disbelief. Other participants believed their

friends had sex or were in relationships, but indicated not initially understanding the perceived value of such relationships. For example, Caroline [asexual/queer, biromantic] indicated:

> I would ask people why they bother to date people, because it looked like "you're just gonna break up, what's the point?" Like I could not grok that people were getting something of immediate benefit that was satisfying to them in the moment. Because I'm like well, obviously, why would you be in a relationship if it's not going to be a long-term, fulfilling thing? Because I clearly only have romantic attractions. and that's the only value I see in relationships, and it's just it's so painfully obvious in retrospect.

Varieties of Caroline's sentiment were noted among other participants who recalled feeling that sex interfered with more enjoyable activities.

However, this feeling of disbelief or doubt as to the rewards associated with relationships was not universal among participants. Some alloromantic participants recalled feeling that, while sex was not sought as a desirable goal, they were able to connect to friends' feelings or values around a desire towards romance and dating. Leslie [asexual, biromantic] noted her experience as akin to allosexual friends: "I think, growing up, I felt normal. I still feel normal now. But, in high school and middle school, I had crushes on guys." Leslie noted her feelings and crushes through the lens of her romantic identity as biromantic, suggesting that it was her romantic attraction, rather than a sexual attraction, that lead to her feeling 'normal' in regard to high school dating culture.

Most participants, regardless of romantic attraction, noted a degree of pressure from their peers during middle and high school to be in a romantic or sexual relationship. This was described as a passive expectation, such as the participant feeling left out when all of their friends are in dating relationships and talk about their relationships to the exclusion of other topics or assumptions that everyone should desire a relationship. However, certain trends in the

data suggested that aromantic individuals may face more friction in processing their own lack of interest in relationships:

> I used to very much be in the mindset of like "I'm supposed to have a relationship. I need to find someone because…I'm incomplete. I'm failing if I don't have that" and, over time, I've just realized like 'this is not only not what would make me happy. It's actively making me miserable to suffer and search for this' [Iris, asexual, aromantic]

The idea of "completeness" was noted by several aromantic participants. Iris, in particular, phrased it as the feeling of fighting the notion that every story needs a romantic subplot to be complete, indicating social norms and values around sexuality and romance that may have been perceived as omnipresent or as the only option for Iris and some of the other participants.

Both aromantic and non-aromantic participants noted having sexual activity that they found to be neutral or undesirable, but continued to engage or seek the activity for a time either out of social obligation or out of an expectation that something would lead to an epiphany and allow them to enjoy sexual activity. This was sometimes accompanied by feelings that the participants had been 'doing it wrong' as a means of trying to understand why they did not enjoy sex or otherwise felt sexual activity to be underwhelming or "empty."

> And I did have a few experiences [of sex], and they just felt very empty, physically and mentally and spiritually, everything. I, I don't know what I expected. Looking back, maybe that's coming from the romantic side that I'm…I thought it'd be this epiphany-type moment, and it definitely wasn't. It just felt…I didn't feel like me [Stephen, Asexual, Aegoromantic, aro-spec]

> When I was in high school and in college, I think I had a strong need to consider my success or failure as a person based on like heterosexual conquests. Right? Like if I wasn't having a lot of sexual contact with women. Then there was something wrong with me, either I wasn't doing it right or I was physically unattractive. There was something, I wasn't a 'real man' if I wasn't having a lot of sex with women in particular. And that was definitely a driving motivation for me through a lot of high school and college, to

> the point where I didn't really stop to think about whether or not I wanted that or was enjoying that. [Roland, asexual, hetero/panromantic]

Feelings of social pressure to participate in social norms surrounding sexual activity or dating during adolescence were noted as present by most participants regardless of romantic attraction. Aromantic individuals were more likely to note manufacturing crushes or stating they had a crush when they did not as a means of appeasing social expectations and easing socializing. Alloromantic individuals were less likely to note crushes as forced but noted a tendency to mix up crushes with deep friendships, aesthetic attraction, or, for participants who identified as transgender or nonbinary gender, "gender envy" towards gender characteristics of others (Justin, asexual, alloromantic).

In regard to sexual identification, several participants noted identifying as another sexuality, such as bisexual, before identifying as asexual. This matches previous research (Winer et al. 2024), but results suggest that this may vary based on whether the participant identified as aromantic or as having some degree of romantic attraction (e.g., demiromantic, alloromantic). Responses from participants on previous terms they had used for their sexuality ranged from feeling that they were conventionally heterosexual to feeling that something was wrong with them as a person for a reason they could not pin down. Some participants further noted that they had not thought deeply about their sexuality until after they had come across the terminology for asexuality and romantic attraction.

For those who identified as having some degree of romantic attraction, such as those who identified as demiromantic or alloromantic, there were more recollections of mixing up their romantic attraction with their sexuality. As one participant noted it, "What I later came to realize was romantic and aesthetic attraction was very easily muddled for 'Oh, I'm experiencing sexual attraction the same as everyone else" [Gail, demisexual, romantic interest toward non-men].

Experiencing attraction, even if strictly for non-sexual activity, appears to lead to understandings of shared experiences with others who share aspects of their attraction. If attraction is felt towards people of a particular sex or gender identity, then that feeling of attraction may further pair with societal understandings of straight, gay, or bisexual and these assumptions were noted by some participants as muddling the understanding of their own sexuality. Due to scarcity of knowledge of asexuality in society and the commonality of portrayals of sexual and romantic attractions coinciding with each other in media, this appears to have caused several participants to consider themselves straight, gay, or with other terms more in line with their romantic attraction. As an example, one participant noted that the feeling that she "liked boys" [Felicia, asexual/queer, aromantic/queer] was never in question due to her feeling some romantic attraction towards men. When compared to the experiences of aromantic participants, the participants who identified as having some romantic attraction appeared to feel more congruity between societal expectations and their personal experiences. This congruity did not negate the tendency of 'feeling different' noted above when comparing their sexual experiences to peers or media, but it did appear to affect their feelings of relating to allosexual populations on the topic of romance and dating.

For aromantic individuals, there appeared to be a different tendency. Notably, four of the aromantic participants described identifying as bisexual or pansexual due to a 'zero equals zero' logic. Put another way, these four participants noted looking at men and women and found that their attraction was roughly the same for both men and women. That reasoning then led these participants to consider themselves bisexual or pansexual, as it roughly equated to an "X = Y" equation. Multiple participants noted this in a mathematical sense, with considering their experiences of learning about asexuality and aromanticism were in part realizing that "zero could

equal zero" [Stephen, Asexual, Aegoromantic/Aro-spec] and that their initial identification can come from experiencing "two sums of null" [Beatrice, asexual, aromantic]. The equation of the (commonly) emotionally charged experiences and complex feelings around the experience of romanticism and sexuality were described with black and white qualities of math. That such concepts are meaningful comparison points to the possibility of asexual and aromantic individuals experiencing romanticism and sexuality differently from other populations, which reinforces Hall and Knox's (2022) suggestions that asexual individuals may view concepts like marriage differently from allosexual populations. This result stood out among aromantic participants as, while over half of the aromantic participants recalled such an experience, no other participants noted such an experience in regard to their asexuality or romantic attraction. Bisexuality being a pathway to asexuality has been noted by recent research (Winer et al. 2024), however, this tendency to equate zeros in attraction appeared exclusive to aromantic participants in this study. Some non-aromantic participants did identify as biromantic or panromantic and continued to do so at the time of the interview, but a sexuality-specific 'zero equals zero' experience did not appear for participants who noted at least some romantic attraction. In contrast, participants who identified as 'heteroromantic' seemed to have used their attraction in certain populations or body types as a reference for their sexual interests before they identified as asexual. This appears to suggest that experiencing some romantic attraction can affect understandings of perceived directionality of sexual attraction before the participant identifies their sexuality as on the asexual spectrum.

### *Shifts in Lived Experiences After Identifying Sexuality / Romantic Attraction*

The importance of learning the terminology for sexual and romantic identities varied between participants and appeared to lead to different experiences based on the romantic identity

of the individual. Not all participants learned the terminology for asexuality at the same time they learned terminology for their romantic identity and the means of learning about asexuality varied substantially. Sources of initial information were diverse and ranged from hearing about the terms from friends, to watching television series which had asexual characters such as the USA TV series Sirens (2014–2015) and the Netflix series BoJack Horseman (2014–2020), to seeing the term through fanfiction and fan forums. Fanfiction, fan forums, and queer online spaces have been noted by previous researchers as areas where LGBTQIA+ people can learn terms relevant to their experience, develop their identity in relative safety, and communicate identities which are otherwise less represented in offline spaces (Downing 2013; Llewellyn 2022). Regardless of the initial source, all participants were aware of the terminology by the time of the interviews. Sexual and romantic identities were both noted as important as at least a descriptor by the majority of participants. However, how it affected their responses on their lived experiences and their mental health varied by romantic attraction. Their perception that their sexuality or romantic attraction was meaningful to their identification did also appear to vary by romantic attraction.

For non-aromantic individuals, participants noted changes as comparatively minor in regard to self-perception. Most non-aromantic participants noted a variation of asexuality remaining in the background of their experiences. The definitions explained their experiences in regard to sexuality, but asexuality was rarely noted as being very important to their lived experiences at the time of the interview. These non-aromantic participants further noted having neutral feelings towards their own asexuality; the term was a good and useful descriptor but not a source of pride or shame. One participant, Gail [demisexual, romantic interest toward non-men], noted their sexuality as akin to being ‘a fish in water,’ with sexuality affecting lived experiences

while rarely being salient to their general experiences. There were exceptions to this pattern: one participant, Justin [asexual, alloromantic], noted that his sexuality was an integral and positive aspect of his identity as the 'neutrality' of asexuality also lead to a perceived greater flexibility and freedom with his general experiences. Another participant, Felicia [asexual/queer, aromantic/queer], noted that she considered asexuality a primary descriptor of her identity because few people know about asexuality and because it allowed her to better empathize with LGBT+ populations.

Aromantic participants were less likely to note neutral feelings and more often indicated a positive shift in lived experiences and self-identification after learning the terminology for their sexuality and romantic attraction. A particularly pronounced example of the shift was noted by Gregory:

> My mind was in a state of deep depression. […] I didn't know what I was, like what was up with me? Where everyone else was so interested in sex. When I found the word, it felt like it was a saving grace. Honestly, it was like, thank goodness, being asexual, it was, it was perfect. When I found out, it just felt like all of that finally went away for once, and I've been much better. I'm actually feeling better in my thirties than I did in my twenties. [Gregory, asexual, aromantic]

While it was not universal or entirely exclusive to aromantic participants, the majority of aromantic participants noted feelings of being 'broken,' 'weird,' or otherwise feeling disconnected from the people around them on topics around sex or romance. For Gregory and other aromantic participants, learning about asexuality appeared to lead to a shift from negative affect and feelings of disconnection from society to a more positive affect and feelings of validation. Gregory's current view on sex is further indicative of this, as he noted he views that "Sex is like broccoli, some people love it, some hate it, that's fine." While other participants

were less flavorful in their descriptions, phrasing that connected asexuality to feelings of relief or validation were more common and pronounced among aromantic participants:

> I figured out I was ace. and then I was like, “Oh, well, good, I'm just done!” [laughs] Never looked back! I was like, “Oh, well, this is good, actually put that on the shelf. and I never have to look in that box again.” [Nathan, asexual/ace-spec, aromantic/aro-spec]

Similar feelings of relief were noted by other aromantic participants. However, while the overall feeling was positive, participants noted the negative aspects in relation to societal norms. Trends on how society does not construct itself around aromantic relationships were noted, often in the context of prioritization of romantic relationships over friendships. Similarly, some participants noted that as marriage, not friendship, is the standard form of stable long-term relationships in society, there was a potential of isolation from others as friends had families. This consideration was not exclusive to aromantic participants, but it was brought up with the context of not seeking romantic partners.

**Discussion**

The current study set out to explore how romantic identity affected lived experiences relative to sexual identity. Overall, findings suggested that, while there are several tendencies shared across participants regardless of romantic identity, there were distinct experiential differences between aromantic and non-aromantic participants. These themes are discussed further below.

Speaking to research question one, which considered how sexual identifications compare to romantic identifications in regard to relevancy to the asexual-spectrum individuals’ perception of identity, asexuality, demisexuality, and similar low-attraction sexualities did not appear to be heavily distinct from each other when comparing experiences across participants. This reinforces

findings of previous researchers (Bogaert 2015b; Dawson et al. 2018; Robbins et al. 2016), who have suggested that asexuality is distinct from other sexualities in part due to comparatively low investment in their sexual identity when compared to other LGBT+ populations. However, this research adds to the literature in regard to understanding the vagueness that can accompany asexuality. Previous research has noted quantitative differences between people who identified as asexual, demisexual, or gray-asexual (e.g., Copulsky and Hammack 2023) and, while the current study's finding does not negate such previous scholarship, the current study's findings problematize the assumption that such categories are cleanly distinguishable experiences. Previous research has suggested that there may be a degree of fluidity in sexual experiences and that asexuality may not be exempt from this tendency (Brotto and Yule 2017), while asexuality has already been noted by researchers to be highly heterogenous (e.g., Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2015; Scherrer 2008; Winer et al. 2024). The current study's findings further these understandings by revealing how even definitions may be somewhat flexible when examining the nuances between asexuality-spectrum identifications, which may be more reflective of how development of self-identification can be a complicated sociopsychological process (Howard 2000). Thus, further research should be conducted in regard to analyzing 'ace-spectrum' or 'aro-spectrum' styles of identities. This research also reinforces the argument made by other recent works that romantic identity is an important factor for the understanding of asexual-spectrum populations (Antonsen et al. 2020; Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022), and further found that distinctions between aromantic and non-aromantic participants were more substantial than distinctions between sexual identities under the asexual umbrella.

For research question two, which considered how sexual and romantic identity each affect perceptions of romantic and sexual activity for the asexual-spectrum individual, the results

suggested that differences of romance and sexual activity varied less by specific sexual identification under the asexual umbrella, but more significantly by romantic identification. The difference between feeling no attraction towards sexual activity and contextual or low feelings of attraction towards sexual activity did not appear to be significant in this sample. Most participants, regardless of sexual or romantic identity, noted friction in regard to the pressures to have sex or be in romantic relationships. This matches previous research which repeatedly noted that asexual individuals may face struggles in regard to partnering norms in society (e.g., Gupta 2019; Vares 2018). However, participants who identified as having some romantic attraction more often noted feeling a connection with allosexual, alloromantic peers on the conversations of dating, crushes, or romance even if sexual topics caused more friction. This has some logic to it; sexual activities are commonly conflated with romantic activities by society and social expectations through logics such as compulsory sexuality (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015), so people who are uninterested in sex but have romantic attraction are likely to still have some desire to engage with norms associated with society's expectations in dating or romance attraction. In contrast, those who identified as aromantic were more likely to manufacture crushes for the purposes of easing social situations in high school and were more likely to identify as bisexual as a pathway identity before identifying as asexual due to having equal sexual and romantic (dis)interest in both male and female-bodied people. Previous research has noted how bisexuality can be a pathway to identifying as asexual (Winer et al. 2024), but this finding adds nuance to that effect by noting that it may be more common among aromantic individuals.

For research question three, which considered how learning about romantic identity may differ from learning about sexual identity, the effect of learning about one's sexual and romantic identity appeared to differ based on the participant's romantic identity. Those who identified as

aromantic noted a deeper relief upon learning their identity and noted a greater positive affect towards their identity relative to non-aromantic participants, often noting that it helped them understand their feelings and make decisions to not seek romantic relationships that were undesirable to them. Participants who identified as non-aromantic were more likely to describe their identity with more neutral affect and consider it as more of a descriptor than as a positive or negative trait for them; the knowledge was considered helpful, as it helped some participants articulate that they "have some barriers, too" [Leslie, asexual, biromantic] with relationships, but otherwise was not noted as a point to focus upon in their self-concept. This finding provides new insight in the field, as few scholars have conducted qualitative comparisons between asexual and aromantic identities. Scholars and members of the asexual community have argued for the separate consideration of sexual and romantic identities (Antonsen et al. 2020; Sennkestra 2020), and this finding reinforces the importance of such differentiation.

In summary, the findings of this study add evidence to the argument that sexual and romantic identities should be considered as potentially differentiated factors. Further, for those who identify as under the asexual umbrella of identities, romantic identity appears to have a greater effect on an individual's lived experiences than differences between asexual, demisexual, gray-asexual, or similar asexual-spectrum identities. Several participants noted a vagueness to their experience of their sexual identity, either preferring generalized asexual-spectrum identities or noting that they were unsure of exactly which asexual or asexual-adjacent identity best described their sexuality. In contrast, differences between being aromantic and a type of alloromantic (e.g., biromantic) were more distinct in both an individual's recollections of lived experiences and the view the individual had of their own sexual and romantic identity. This

finding provides new light on a burgeoning area of LGBT+ research and reinforces the importance of considering romance as a factor that is at time differentiated from sexual activity.

*Implications*

These findings have important implications beyond academia. For professionals who work with asexual and general LGBTQ+ populations, the findings of this study suggest that care should be taken to not conflate sexual and romantic activities. Likewise, for social workers, psychologists, and counselors who work with asexual populations, this work builds on the suggestions of previous scholars (e.g., Gupta 2017b; Pinto 2014) in considering the social needs of individuals who identify as asexual; in particular, for those who do not feel romantic attraction, acknowledging that romance is optional and that other forms of social bonding can be important and fulfilling may be useful advice. For asexual, alloromantic individuals, working to balance individual needs with sexual and romantic social norms may be more valuable.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The qualitative nature of this study presents the risk of extrapolation from too small of a dataset. Differences in experience based on sexuality may still exist, even if they were not pronounced within this dataset. It is possible, and indeed likely, that some difference exists between asexual, demisexual, and similar sexualities even if nuances of the terminology may carry a degree of vagueness. However, the goal of this article was to analyze the relative importances between sexual and romantic identities. The sample used in this research had a significantly larger difference when compared over lines of romantic attraction, though such a distinct difference should be examined with quantitative data to further understand the prevalence and strength of this difference. Further, this dataset was largely composed of white non-Hispanic participants. While this is a common limitation in this field of research, it remains

a limitation as experiences can differ by race. The vagueness in regard to specificity of sexual identity has also not been noted by other researchers, so additional research will be required to verify if this a common feeling among asexual individuals.

Further testing of romantic attraction as a separate variable is needed in future research. In particular, finding correlations between romantic attraction and feelings of social connectedness, feelings of friendship, and feelings of long-term social stability may prove enlightening in this area. Similarly, I suggest attempting to compare romantic attraction between non-asexual populations; though such an endeavor may require some additional inventiveness in regard to measuring tools to account for differences in knowledge, there is little reason to believe that romantic attraction solely affects the experiences of asexual populations. Further examination of allosexual populations through the lens of romantic attraction would likely be interesting and fruitful. Such understandings of romantic attraction may prove highly useful in the education of sexuality and for professionals working with LGBTQ+ populations.

**Conclusion**

In summary, specific differences in sexual identification were of minimal significance to asexual-spectrum individuals, but romantic attraction was more likely to correlate with desires, engagement with social norms, and distinct perceptions of their own sexual and romantic identity. The bulk of research in the understanding of asexuality has been examining asexuality as an umbrella term or through the lens of separating out identities based on sexuality. My findings here suggest that such a focus may not be an ideal manner for examining the lived experiences of people who identify as asexual. Society may often be based on sexual conduct or norms, but the private acts of sex are filtered through the public acts of romance. As such, the

effects of romance should not be underestimated relative to sexuality, and further research into the importance of romantic attraction should be paramount in this field.

# Chapter 3: "Why Does Society Put Marriage So Far Above Friendship?" Norms, Friction, Squishes, and Asexual Views of Romantic Pairing Behavior

Abstract:

Marriage is often presented as having a distinct priority over other forms of social connection, such as friendship, in Western society. However, while this ordinal positioning is common, the reasons are frequently unstated or based on assumptions of love, reproduction, or stability of the family unit. This research questions how these valuations and understandings on a social level may affect the development and perceptions of asexual-spectrum individuals, as asexuality is often defined by not feeling attraction towards sexual activity, such as the kind which is frequently associated with romantic relationships and marriage. The research included in-depth interviews with 21 individuals who identified across the asexual spectrum (e.g., asexual, demisexual, gray-a) and who identified varying levels of romantic attractions (e.g., alloromantic, aromantic, demiromantic). Findings were centered around three themes: (1) understandings and perceptions of romantic relationships, (2) valuation of romance compared to other forms of relationships, and (3) manufacturing crushes and the value of relationships as a means to be "normal." This research furthers our understanding of the relative valuations of social units, such as friendships and marriage, and how asexual individuals may learn about their own sexuality and react to the sexualized expectations of Western society.

Keywords: asexuality, marriage, sexual attraction, romantic attraction, differentiated attraction

## Introduction

While structures of marriage, cohabitation, and long-term partnerships have changed over time and we have seen an increase in diversity and individualization in the models of marriage in recent decades (Coontz 2006; Sassler and Miller 2017), few would attempt to argue that marriage has lost its position as an institution or has lost its importance in the public consciousness (Cherlin 2020). Marriage still carries a priority over other styles of relationships such as friendship (Doan, Loehr, and Miller 2014; Sassler and Lichter 2020). However, the purpose of research into marriage, romance, and sexuality is often to understand how sexual and romantic relationships can affect the lives of those who participate in such romantic or sexual partnerships; however, there has been a critiqued gap in the literature surrounding LGBT+ and particularly asexual experiences (Reczek 2020; Winer et al. 2024).

With these concepts noted, there has been little research into how this prioritization of marriage over other relationships affects people who identify under the asexual umbrella or aromantic umbrella. Asexuality refers to having no feelings of sexual attraction but is often used as an umbrella term, alongside terms such as asexual-spectrum, which includes sexualities defined by having little-to-no attraction towards sexual activity. Asexual-spectrum identities also tend to be highly heterogenous (Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2015; Scherrer 2008; Winer et al. 2024). Relevant to this research is that variation exists in individuals' experiences of sexual attraction and the degree of romantic attraction felt by the individual. Romantic attraction refers to self-described feelings of attraction towards romantic activity disconnected from sexual activity, and can include perceiving oneself as having a conventional level of attraction (alloromantic or non-aromantic) or as also having little-to-no attraction in a manner reflective of asexuality (e.g., aromantic, demiromantic, gray-aromantic). Further, while sexual attraction and romantic

attraction often coincide, they are not the same phenomenon. An individual may feel attraction towards romance without having an attraction towards sexual activity and vice-versa. Further definitions may be found in Index A.

Recent research suggests that asexual populations may face friction with social norms and expectations due to living in a society that adheres to several unstated expectations that mix sexual and romantic activities (e.g., Mitchell and Hunnicutt 2019; Vares 2018). While such research is valuable, our understanding remains fragmentary and there is much left to be understood regarding the interactions between societal relationship norms as they affect asexual and aromantic populations.

There is a lack of research regarding what styles of long-term relationships are more likely to be viewed as preferable to those who identify as asexual or aromantic, especially if current norms surrounding marriage or romance are seen as undesirable by the individual. Further, as marriage is conventionally considered one of the most stable of relationships in regard to longevity, friendships and other relationships may be expected to be weakened, lost, or sacrificed for the purposes of a marriage. For instance, while marriage-related norms have been shifting towards increased complexity in the styles of relationships preferred by couples (Furstenberg 2014), and while there has been a rise of ease of communication over long-distances to allow for maintaining long-distance relationships, there remains strong evidence that relocation of a marital household can have significant negative effects on social lives (Nisic and Kley 2019). In such cases, it is easy to predict that social norms would dictate that marriage or family should be prioritized to the detriment of friendship-based social networks. Further, the efforts required in socially disruptive events such as relocation are typically not seen as justified for the maintaining of friendships. This brings to question how such relative valuations between

friendships and romance may shape the lives of asexual, and especially aromantic, individuals who may be less invested in romantic partnerships.

To address this question of how asexual individuals perceive and act upon these relative understandings of friendship and marriage, this article uses qualitative interviews of 21 participants who each identify on the asexual spectrum but vary in regards to their romantic identity. Overall, findings were centered around three themes: (1) understandings and perceptions of romantic relationships, (2) valuation of romance compared to other forms of relationships, and (3) manufacturing crushes and the value of relationships as a means to be "normal." Together, these findings have important implications for our understanding of asexuality, but also for our understanding of the purpose and values of relationship styles such as marriage and friendships.

**Literature Review**

Contrasting intricacies of romantic relationships against non-romantic relationships has not been a focus of existing literature. This is problematic for research, as there can be differences between the desire to be in a sexual or romantic relationship and the desire for specific actions or traits, such as cuddling or stability, which are commonly tied to romantic relationships (Vares 2018). Of further relevance for this research, researchers have noted that attempting to extrapolate experiences of asexual groups from research on non-asexual groups can be problematic (Chasin 2015). With those complications acknowledged, the current norms and perceived goals of long-term romantic pairings in recent history are reviewed below. While extrapolation to asexual populations should be avoided, such norms may present a societal

backdrop to our understanding of the lived experiences and desires of aromantic and asexual individuals.

### *Forms and Goals of Modern Long-Term Romantic Relationships*

The goals of marriage or similar long-term sexual-romantic relationships have typically kept to a mixture of financial and emotional stability, cementing a connection to a loved one, and acting as a cultural milestone of adulthood. However, while the concept of the nuclear family has held a monolithic position in the United States culture in the mid-1900s, trends in marriage and romantic formations have shifted towards have shifted from "consensus to complexity" (Furstenberg 2014; Sassler and Lichter 2020) and, as such, the goals of marriages have become diversified as well.

The norm of marrying for love, which supplanted the norms of marrying for stability or family connections in the 1700 and 1800s, is still the most common of reasons for marriage in modern times (Coontz 2006). A more recent change is marriage's place as an indicator of adulthood. Marriage has previously been seen foundational aspect of adulthood and was perceived as a part of entering into adulthood; however, it is now more often being perceived as a 'capstone' to an already successful romantic relationship and adulthood (Cherlin 2020). As cultural expectations have shifted, an individual is now expected to become an adult, achieve a number of life goals, secure economic stability, and then marry as the capstone to a successful adulthood. This shift is far from universal, as researchers have noted that expectations of romantic relationships, balance of housework between relationship members, timing of marriage, understandings of responsibilities of spouses, and the rise of cohabitation and alternative forms of long-term romantic partnerships has diversified expectations surrounding romance (Furstenberg 2014; Hochschild 2012; Schneider 2012).

Increasing diversity has itself become normalized as the expectation that everyone keep to a singular type of family structure has significantly weakened (Cherlin 2020; Seltzer 2019). While this most prominently coincides with the normalization of cohabitation as both a step before marriage in many relationships and as a 'poor man's marriage' in some instances (Sassler and Miller 2017), this increase in diversity of relationship types has also included an increasing acceptance of LGBT+ marriage and romantic relationships (Armenia and Troia 2017), and increases in relationships, both marriage and cohabitation, at later ages and among the elderly (Carr and Utz 2020). These factors combined suggest that while there still is a lasting existence of the imagery surrounding the monolithic nuclear marriages of the mid-1900s, and while there are still formal rights and informal privileges associated with heterosexual marriage (Doan et al. 2014), the practices of pairing, marriage, and romantic behaviors have indeed shifted towards increasing normalization of varied, individualistic, and complex styles of relationships. This diversification has also correlated with increases in lifelong singlehood in a conventional sense (Wang and Parker 2014), through scholars have warned against oversimplification of the trend in lifelong singlehood (Tessler 2023).

That diversity noted, expectations placed on an individual in regard to sexual and romantic relationships are affected by traits such as an individual's age and sex assigned at birth. For age, common social expectations tend to center around youthful appearance and conventional presentations of what is seen as 'sexy' for a person, which can create social norms where older individuals, particularly women, are seen as 'past it' if they cannot maintain a youthful appearance or otherwise match conventional ideals of sexiness (Curley and Johnson 2022; Towler et al. 2021). This can lead to assumptions that people become too old to marry or too old to have sex, and sets social expectations that people should become less sexually active

as they age. Further, these norms also reinforce an expectation that there is a time limit to marriage and an assumption that people become functionally non-sexual as they become older.

### *Asexuality, Aromanticism, and Long-term Relationships*

While little information has been found relating to how asexual populations view intimate or long-term relationships such as marriage (Carroll 2020), previous research has considered asexual individuals' relationship histories in more brief windows such as dating relationships (Vares 2018). Further, the primary means that have been used for examining marriage, dating, or other longer-term relationships for asexual individuals has been to examine existing, conventionally acknowledged relationships (e.g., Mitchell and Hunnicutt 2019; Robbins, Low, and Query 2016; Vares 2018). This focus on such relationships is rational for other LGB+ groups which are largely defined by style of emotional-sexual attraction to specific categories of individual; however, asexual is not defined by any specific *directionality* of attraction, but rather *intensity* (or lack thereof) of attraction. As such, any conflict that may arise in relationships may be more influenced by the norms of compulsory sexuality in society rather than considerations of the sex of individuals in a relationship (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015).

Society teaches norms surrounding intimate relationships that are embedded with sexual expectations (Gupta 2017a; Przybylo 2011; Rothblum, Heimann, and Carpenter 2019), and it is often those norms that are a source of friction with relationships for asexual individuals. Social norms around sexual expectations are further a source of confusion in both members of the general population who view asexual individuals and for the asexual individuals themselves as they develop their identity (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015b). In regard to acceptance of nonsexuality and ace-phobia/aphobia, there is some evidence of overt discrimination against asexual individuals (Gupta 2017a; MacInnis and Hodson 2012; Robbins et al. 2016); that noted,

asexual individuals have more often described facing isolation or unreceptiveness due to others failing to understand the concept of not enjoying or not seeking sexual activity (Scott, McDonnell, and Dawson 2016).

Complications in dating have been noted as a common experience among asexual individuals who choose to date. Expectations of eventual sexual activity can come up in relationships, even if an allosexual partner initially believes they can accept continuing a relationship without sexual activity (Vares 2018). This has overlapped with a partner's belief that the asexuality would change over time due to it either 'being a phase' or the partner believing their sexuality could be 'fixed' by the non-asexual partner's self-perceived skill with sex (Vares 2018). Outside the complications specifically regarding sexual activity, Vares (2018) also noted that romantic, non-sexual physical contact could be a point of friction for asexual individuals seeking romantic relationships due to misunderstandings regarding differences between sexual and romantic contact. In some cases, Vares (2018) noted social expectations causing some female participants to feel guilt for leading their male dates on by not participating in sexual activity. For asexual males, the lack of sexual activity was more likely to be a point of friction with heteronormative expectations related to masculinity either through in the individual's perception of their personal value as a man or through the perception of the person's masculinity by others (Vares 2018).

However, while immediate styles and complications of dating and pairing behaviors have been noted, long-term considerations of family formation or children for asexual populations have only recently been touched upon in research. The views of asexual populations do differ from allosexual populations on quantitative measures of desiring marriage or other romance-adjacent feelings and behaviors, with asexual respondents noting lower interest in marriage and

children than allosexual respondents (Hall and Knox 2022). Hall and Knox (2022) further noted in their research a potential complicating factor for current quantitative measures where there was an uncertainty of if asexual populations consider ‘marriage’ in the same way as allosexual populations do, and the researchers acknowledged the need for research to better discern what factors are at play. Attempts to measure romantic attraction separated from sexual attraction have also been a rarity in research until very recently even though the distinction is likely to be important (Hammack et al. 2019). As such, there is minimal current data on how self-identification of romantic attraction may affect views on personal desires of romance or marriage.

**Current Study**

Using data from qualitative interviews ($N = 21$), the current study brings new understandings of asexual individuals’ romantic attractions and perspectives about romantic relationships as they relate to societal norms surrounding romance and marriage. Specifically, the following research questions are examined:

Research question #1: How do people under the asexual umbrella understand and perceive romantic relationships?

Research question #2: How do people under the asexual umbrella evaluate different styles of relationships, such as friendships and romance?

Research question #3: How do people under the asexual umbrella navigate the social norms in society surrounding romantic and sexual relationships?

**Methodology**

Data were gathered from individuals who responded to an initial survey requesting asexual participants. A recruitment message (see Appendix B) was posted on Twitter and a Discord channel catering to asexual students and scholars in the academic community. The link was shared over Twitter by several asexual groups and members of the community. A total of 443 individuals responded to the initial survey, which was much higher than anticipated. After the initial survey, which consisted of basic background information, the participants were separated into groups by sex assigned at birth and feelings toward sexual activity such as being sex-averse, sex-neutral, or sex-positive as noted by Carrigan (2011). While such research has considered this trait important to research, participants later noted during interviews that their feelings were more complicated than may be expressed with such categorizations and several responded differently when given the opportunity to explain their experiences. Regardless, this led to six categorizations which included three groups (sex-averse, sex-neutral, and sex-positive participants) each further divided by two groups (participants assigned male or female at birth). Within each of the categorizations, roughly equal numbers of respondents were chosen at random using a random number generator and invited to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview.[2]

A total of 21 interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted over ZOOM with audio and video recording, with interviews lasting from 45 minutes to 140 minutes. Once the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and conducted two waves of coding. The first wave included descriptive coding using a Social Constructionist paradigm and focused on how participants learned about, viewed, and engaged with

[2] Analysis of data categorizations using the traits of sex-averse, sex-neutral, and sex-positive traits did not appear to affect or correspond with other any responses during the interview portion of data collection.

understandings of sexual and romantic attraction. This was coded for instances in both how the participant perceived their own identity, sexuality, or self, and how the participant perceived the actions, expectations, and norms of the people around them. The second wave of coding was analytical and guided by the research questions in order to identify commonalities between the experiences of participants and trends in the effect of events relevant to the research questions, such as effects of a participant of learning terminology associated with asexuality. Participant characteristics are included in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1>

While only ten of the participants reported being cisgender (i.e. not transgender or nonbinary) may appear quite low, previous research has noted that asexual populations have notably higher rates of identifying with nonbinary gender or agender (i.e. identifying as not having a gender) identities relative to other populations (Gupta 2019). It is also important to note that self-labels of sexuality and romantic attraction were often described as feeling vague and as a result, some participants used different labels from those they listed in the survey during the interview portions of the data collection. This tendency will be discussed as part of the results. The interview questions are included in Appendix C.

Participants provided electronic consent during the survey portion of data collection and provided oral consent during the interview phase of data collection to participate in the research for the purposes of publication. Transcripts were de-identified by changing names of all participants and removing any information, such as specific location names, which was specific enough to be used to directly link the transcript to specific individuals. Recordings were deleted after transcriptions. As an incentive for participation in interviews, individuals were placed into a raffle for one of four $25 Amazon Gift Cards. The Institutional Review Board for the Protection

of Human Subjects at the University of Oklahoma approved the data collection for this research (IRB Number: 14679) on June 23, 2022.

## Results

As may be expected, the experiences and views of relationships that asexual-spectrum participants held were varied. Some experienced a series of romantic relationships before finding the act of dating to be undesirable, while others noted being happily married or in romantic relationships at the time of the interview. Overall, findings were centered around three themes: (1) understandings and perceptions of romantic relationships, (2) valuation of romance compared to other forms of relationships, and (3) manufacturing crushes and the value of relationships as a means to be "normal." These themes are discussed below.

### *Understandings and Perceptions of Romantic Relationships*

While not universal, almost all participants noted some experience of realizing their romantic relationship perceptions were different from those of peers. Most participants noted experiences around the time of high school or college where they considered romance through phrasings such as how they "did not fit the mold," [Felicia, asexual/queer, aromantic/queer] in regard to relationships, "did not feel like they were watching the same movie" [Justin, asexual, alloromantic] as friends or other peers, or "felt alien when friends were having issues" [Beatrice, asexual, aromantic] with relationships or dating. The elements of this disconnection appeared to stem not from a single source but from a combination of multiple factors, such as differences in physical sensation and differences in language.

To focus on the first factor of perceived difference in physical sensations, one participant, Kate, recalled comparing physical experiences of attraction with friends and not being able to relate to the physical sensations that their friends noted:

> No matter what type of relationships [my friends in college and high school] were in, they were talking about stuff that was strongly physical. I was like "This is just not something that's interesting to me," I think it's fun to hear about. I love hearing about my friends' little hookup stories. […] but I'm like "This is not me." I was like "There's something different here." [Kate, gray-asexual, queer/questioning]

Kate's experience is reflective of lack of interest in participating in the dating and sexual practices she perceived in her friend's life. Further, the "strongly physical" topics were the point of disconnect. This did not require that she be disgusted by sexual activity as a concept, as she enjoyed hearing about hookups from friends. Notably, research has indicated that asexual individuals are able to experience some physical sensations associated with masturbation or direct sexual contact (Bogaert 2017); however, Kate appears to be noting the physical sensation of sexual attraction towards other individuals that may precede sexual contact. As asexuality is defined by a lack of sexual attraction, this experience may be easy to connect with being on the asexual-spectrum.

A second factor is one of language. One participant recalled his experiences in talking to friends about dating and realizing that he and his friend were using different definitions for the same descriptors:

> I used the same kind of language for a long time but didn't realize that I didn't mean it in the same way that they did. So when somebody says, "wow, that girl is hot," what they were thinking of as "hot" was a completely different evaluation than what I was making. But we were using the same word. [Justin, asexual, alloromantic]

Justin had, before that realization, interpreted the word "hot" to refer to a desire to spend time with the described person because the person was interesting to be around, had a sense of humor,

or was thoughtful. The concept of sexual desirability due to physical appearance was not a part of his interpretation at the time. The word “hot” still was connected to a kind of attraction, but it referred to a platonic form of attraction rather than a romantic or sexual form of it. A similar experience came from a participant who noted growing up in a religious environment that rarely brought up specific details about sex or romance:

> So when everyone is talking in vague terms, what I later came to realize was romantic and aesthetic attraction most of the time was very easily muddled for “Oh, I'm experiencing sexual attraction the same as everyone else.” [Gail, demisexual, romantic interest toward non-men]

While knowledge of the nuances differentiating sexual, romantic, and aesthetic attraction is not currently common in most communities, these participants’ experiences still give evidence to the importance of language in understanding and communicating experiences and the degree of assumption around social definitions of romance and sexuality. The consideration of ‘having a crush’ was similar with a vague lack of definition associated with its feeling such that some participants recalled mixing up feelings different from what they considered society to hold as conventional:

> I actually appreciate the word crush because it's not really tinged by whether it's a romantic or platonic [feeling], and so the reason I say that is because after I've told [a] person I have a crush on them, every time I've come to almost the immediate realization that it's almost purely platonic. It's a platonic love, like a capital “L” Love, and that's something that has been true for me in a lot of cases. So I say like, I fall in love with my friends all the time. And that's something where it's not sexual. [Jaiden, demisexual, demi/homoromantic]

In Jaiden’s case, finding more nuanced definitions did not change the idea of love being present, but allowed him to specify a type of non-sexual love that is more applicable to his experienced sensation. Though the definition selected for the term “crush” may not be entirely conventional,

it suggests a more nuanced understanding that may cause confusion for others using only sexual definitions of love or attraction.

Outside of specific terms and the confusion that can arise from understanding love and attraction, there are other factors that can occur when engaging in dating and other romantic activities. Language and social norms can blend in the enactment of socially expected roles such as boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse. While such roles are rarely cleanly defined or solidified for a community, as there is a high degree of variability and individuality in such relationships, several participants noted friction during romantic relationships that appeared to stem from miscommunications in regard to expectation in relationships:

> One of the boys at some point asked me like, “Hey, what is this? What are we after?” We've been on a few dates and I was very confused by that question. Because I thought “we were just dating,” and after that we stopped [the relationship] because he wasn't satisfied with my answer, [Heidi, asexual, aromantic]

> The fact that I didn't really have a good definition of asexuality […] definitely impacted the way that I perceived what was going on in those relationships, and especially like my needs, or the way that I was able to meet the needs of my partner. […] It caused a lot of problems in relationships for me, because there was an expectation that they had, that they believed I had signed up and was on the same page about. But what they were looking for wasn’t something that I…it it's hard to explain. It's like they were expecting the color pink out of something, and I was giving them the color green, and I thought I was giving them what they were looking for. [Justin, asexual, alloromantic]

> I've been in relationships that I thought were romantic and sexual. I think back and realized were not. [Nathan, asexual/ace-spec, aromantic/aro-spec]

Each of these excerpts suggests that there can be differences in understanding romantic relationships that may occur for some asexual individuals. The asexual individuals noted here

recalled acting in good faith but, due to differences in expectations of social norms or miscommunications, friction arose in their relationships.

There appeared to be some difference between aromantic asexual and non-aromantic asexual participants in this area. Those who identified as being either aromantic or under the aromantic umbrella (e.g., demiromantic) recalled more instances of friction or moments of misunderstanding in relationships. Those who identified as asexual but not on the aromantic-spectrum were more likely to note that, while they may have had differences in sexual desires when comparing themselves to peers or romantic partners, they tended to be able to sympathize with more people when comparing romantic attractions. The social norms around romance, talking about dating with friends, and expectations in romantic roles were less often noted as points of disconnection or miscommunication. As such, the cause of friction is likely not solely a combination of interpretations of language and social norms, but also a difference between individuals in regard to how they may experience the sexual attraction and romantic attraction that they use as both a basis for understanding the terms and norms.

### *Valuation of Romance Compared to Other Forms of Relationships*

Outside of the differences that appeared to arise in relation to specifics of roles or definitions surrounding romance, there was a great variety of experiences and considerations regarding the value of romance, marriage, and dating among participants. Several participants made comparisons between romantic relationships and friendships, which often involved giving relative valuations of what a romantic relationship is worth compared to a friendship. The valuations often were reflective of personal valuations that the individual carried or recollections of comparing their views to friends' valuations of romance, but some participants stepped into questioning wider societal valuations of romance over friendship.

> When I do find myself like attracted to my peers or my friends…I don't seek out relationships, anyway, cause I'm afraid of damaging the friendships that I have. I think that those friendships that I currently have and I'm holding on to are more important than a potential romantic relationship. […] This is just more validation that I don't need to be a romantic relationship, because it's all just a big mess, and seems like more effort than it's worth. [Marcos, Asexual, Demi-/ Panromantic]

> I don't feel a need to be romantically partnered unless it's worth it and with somebody who makes sense. [Pheobe, Demisexual, Demiromantic]

Comparisons between friendship and romance are quite common in any population, but the statements by Marcos and Pheobe note a relatively even valuation of the two. Romance is seen as potentially valuable, but not something to sacrifice or risk a good friendship for. Romance is also presented as taking more effort and being more risky, to an extent that it may not be worth more than friendship in many cases. Another participant, Fredrick [Asexual/Ace-spec, Hetero/Alloromantic], explicitly noted that he considered romance "to be of equal value" to what he already enjoyed with the robust circle of friends he had. Romance, for these participants, was not perceived as negative but it also was not perceived as bringing any substantial positives to their social lives. One participant drew the argument further and questioned the valuations of friendship and romance that society holds:

> Why can't you have your best relationship be your best friend? […] Why can't your roommate be your go-to? Or why does it have to be demeaned to a lower tier? I guess the chasm in-between the two: romantic and friendship. Why can't it be equals? And then why, you know, as long as the bills are being paid in the house. Why does it matter that it's not a stereotypical couple? […] why does it matter what kind of relationships, and why do we put relationship superiority or relationship supremacy at all with regards to it? [Gregory, asexual, aromantic]

Gregory further noted that he felt better about his own relationships and mental health when he realized that he was asexual and preferred friendships as his only type of relationship. He drew

the comparison that, after realizing his own preferences and deciding to stop prioritizing the social norms he perceived, he felt better and healthier in his 30s than he ever did in his 20s when he stressed over social expectations.

Understanding the value of peers' investment in romantic relationships was another area where participants noted a gap between their personal thoughts on the value or purpose of relationships compared to the thoughts of others. This gap was often noted in past tense, with participants reflecting on how they perceived relationships during their youth. As one participant recalled:

> I would ask people why they bothered to date people because it looked like "you're just gonna break up, what's the point?" like I could not grok that people were getting something of immediate benefit: that it was satisfying to them in the moment. Because I'm like "well, obviously, why be in a relationship if it's not going to be a long term fulfilling thing?" Because I clearly only have romantic attractions. And that's the only value I see in relationships. And it's just it's so painfully obvious in retrospect. [Caroline, asexual/queer, biromantic]

Participants presented mixed recollections on the concept of dating for a kind of intrinsic enjoyment, but Caroline was not alone in initially questioning others or not understanding that dating could have intrinsic and immediate benefits for some people even when marriage was not perceived as a likely outcome.

On the far side of the questioned value of romance, two participants also strongly noted an affinity for romantic stories or the concept of romantic love in the abstract. One participant, Stephen, identified as having a romantic attraction somewhere between cupioromantic and aegoromantic, and described his experiences through noting how he loved sappy romances, wrote young adult romantic fiction, and would be interested in a romantic relationship. However, he struggled to feel a romantic connection in person that he was able to appreciate as strongly as

he could in abstract or storytelling. He recalled having several “squishes,” or crushes on friends, where he developed deep platonic relationships with those friends. The line between platonic and romantic relationships had been blurry for him, and he noted he is currently reevaluating his approach to dating as a whole.

Other participants described different valuations of romance, either in the degree to which the romance was valued or as a qualitative difference in the type of value they saw in the romance. For the former, which was particularly common among participants who identified as alloromantic or were in a relationship, it was common to note their appreciation for their partner. For all but one participant, who was demiromantic, the act of sexual activity with the partner remained unappealing; however, these participants in relationships noted enjoying their current relationship with their partner and worked with their partners to develop and maintain healthy relationships through finding ways to accommodate the sexual needs of the non-asexual partner, either through sexual activity or, in one case, through an agreement to be in a sexually open relationship so the partner could have sex outside the relationship and romance within in it.

When using standards of more modern societal understandings of romance as a means to sexual activity or as goal unto itself, some participants noted qualitatively different valuations for romance that coincided less with modern Western understandings of marriage and more with older versions of long-term stability of a social unit. This was noted more prominently for participants who described having troubled backgrounds, but other participants noted it in smaller degrees when in situations that could be isolating without a partner.

> So I grew up in a household with there was a lot of instability, and a lot of emotional abuse, and a lot of…I was the target, I was allowed to be the target, and part of that really, really drove me to seek relationships, that traditional bonding. You know, man and woman, sex-involved relationship, because I really needed

> some kind of stability. […] Economic stability and home stability and other things that I *never* had as a kid. [Ramona, demisexual, demiromantic: emphasis participant's]

> There was a point in a friend group a few years ago that it felt like everyone was focused on getting a boyfriend. And it was just "Ah, you all want to get laid, okay, I don't. So I'm gonna step away from all this," and it was fine. I kept my friendships with them. I just wasn't a part of that friend group that, I don't know, it felt a little isolating where it felt like I couldn't be a part of the big group. [Leslie, asexual, biromantic]

Leslie's example was reflected in the experience of some other participants. For example, Stephen noted feeling like a third or fifth wheel while with his friends at times for similar reasons. Such participants indicated that relationships gave other potential benefits outside of intrinsic enjoyment, either connectivity to a social group or feelings of stability. However, this varied substantially in the sample. Other participants noted that, in general cases where they could potentially seek romance, they would prefer deep friendships and find those relationships fulfilling. Yet while the sample varied, these findings suggest that there is a high amount of individualization that is reminiscent of modern norms in relationships even if the emphasis on romance is less central for a portion of the participants.

### *Manufacturing Crushes and the Value of Relationships as a Means to be "Normal"*

A trend among participants, particularly those who identified as aromantic, was to describe the benefits that corresponded with being in a romantic relationship in a more socially embedded context. These often came when the participant was describing a context in either school or work relationships where the social norms carried an expectation of dating or marriage as 'normal,' potentially to an extent that not dating or not seeking romance was considered problematic. High school social groups were noted in particular when it came to dating and sex-related norms:

> Growing up in the "You need to find love to be normal" mindset, it did take a while to get to accept that "no, this really isn't something you want." [Beatrice, asexual, aromantic]

> The entire friend group, is kind of partnered up. I was like. "Well, this is weird. I guess if I want to be included in this group of people, I have to date one of you." [Denise, demi-/ace-spec, demi-/gray-aro-spec]

> I think when I was in high school and college, I had a strong need to consider like my success or failure as a person based on like heterosexual conquests. […] If I wasn't having a lot of sexual contact with women, then there was something wrong with me, either I wasn't doing it right or I was physically unattractive, right? [Roland, asexual, hetero/panromantic]

> I spent probably from about age 35 to 45-ish not [seeking a relationship], feeling kind of bad about it. Like "I should be dating. I should be doing these things. All my friends are married. They're getting married, or they're dating, or they're they've kids" […] So there's that nagging feeling like I'm doing something wrong. There's something wrong with me. I'm not normal. I'm not acceptable. [Ramona, demisexual, demiromantic]

As seen above, most participants who noted these feelings did so in the past tense, often as part of something that they had gone through before knowing about asexuality or aromanticism as a whole. For these participants and others, sexual or dating behaviors were taken or ruminated over for several reasons: fitting in with peers, sense of obligation, believing that everyone enjoys dating so they should as well, feeling pressured by a perceived expectation or time limit to marriage, feeling that to not marry or have sex was an indication of being a failure in an abstract sense, or as part of judging their own personal value using the standards of the culture they engage with. For participants who were assigned male at birth and who were alloromantic, such as Roland above, this friction between social norms and personal desires tended to be more associated with sexual activity than romantic activity.

However, these thoughts about pairing up did not always lead to dating. Participants recalled manufacturing crushes to tell peers about as a social indicator of interest in romantic activity while also avoiding engaging in sexual or romantic activity.

> So you know everyone had their crush. So I said, "I like Cody." And from kindergarten to seventh grade, everybody knew "Felicia likes Cody" because I just picked a boy and you know [laughed], kind of had that. And then when I moved into a public school setting, I did the same thing. My guy best friend. I was like, "cool, you're my crush now," [Felicia, asexual/queer, aromantic/queer]

The platonic relationship kept as such, with Felicia noting that the man in question dated other women freely while they remained friends. The purpose of the crush was surface level and acted as a means for Felicia to appease social expectations without forcing herself into a relationship. Projecting interest in dating or sex carried with it a projection of normality in situations where sexual or romantic obligations are expected.

The burden of social expectations or feeling pressured to be in romantic relationships was noted as ending, or in some cases changing, at the time they entered college or when they entered the workforce. Participants who went to college noted that expectations shifted and people stopped caring about who they dated or if they dated. Individual situations could still appear, but participants indicated that the presence of pressure was, overall, less constant because college relationships can be transient and more optional. Participants also noted having a better understanding of themselves to either explain, prepare for, or knowingly avoid areas where friction could show up. For participants who were working, most participants noted that they were either open at their workplace as asexual or were able to keep their sexuality as part of their own business. Work-related functions that included bringing significant others could feel isolating, but pressure was never direct. Friction tended to come more from defiance of norms for those who were not married. Gregory, for instance, noted that he still felt pressure to be

married or have a romantic relationship due in part to being a male teacher. The tendencies noted by these participants suggests that it was the defiance of social norms of being married, rather than specific sexuality, that tended to be the larger source of friction.

**Summary of Findings**

To summarize, the asexual participants in this study frequently connected their understanding of their own sexuality to the expectations of their social location. As would be expected, growing up around expectations of dating or sex could influence how participants perceived such concepts; however, this is not a straightforward process. Participants varied in their interpretations, ranging from feeling like they were watching a different movie from friends, to perceiving marriage primarily as a means to stability, to self-directed feelings of failure, to interpreting terms commonly connected to sexually-coded attractiveness (e.g., a person is “hot”) to describe forms of nonsexual attractiveness. Furthermore, friendship was frequently compared to romance, and several participants compared the styles of relationships through the lens of them being equal or similar in emotional value. This valuation could lead to points of friction for some participants, with some participants expressing frustration at society’s prioritization of marriage or feeling a sense of fear if friends were to marry and abandon their friendships. Lastly, the findings indicated that participants were not passive in the face of social situations which obligated sexual or romantic activities, as some participants who were uninterested in dating noted manufacturing crushes to quell social obligations in high school or keeping quiet in the workplace when questions of romantic relationships arose.

**Discussion**

This paper set out to deepen our knowledge of how asexual individuals perceive and understand the valuations of friendship and marriage. Overall, the findings show that asexual individuals can be diverse in their understanding of social expectations and in their way of acting upon societal expectations. However, high valuations of marriage or love, though common in modern Western society (Coontz 2006), do not appear to be as prevalent among the asexual participants in this study.

In association with research question 1, which asked how people under the asexual umbrella understand and perceive romantic relationships, the findings align with Hall and Knox's (2022) suggestion that asexual populations may view marriage differently from other populations. Participants initially understood their own experiences through the terminology and concepts that society presented to them, which included societal norms and expectations regarding feelings of love, dating, marriage, and sex. These are the same expectations that may be placed on modern alloromantic and allosexual populations that have been researched elsewhere (e.g., Coontz 2006); however, asexual individuals recalled developing their own understanding and phrasing of what amounts to love or romance as different from dominant relationship norms. When personal experiences and social expectations aligned, such as if an alloromantic asexual person compared their feelings of romance to alloromantic peers, then less friction appeared to occur for the individual. When the experiences did not align, for example with asexual aromantic individuals being told that sex or romance was highly enjoyable and substantially valued above friendship, then friction may be more likely. The effect of the friction ranged from feelings of brokenness or isolation to non-conventional approaches to relationships, such as understanding the phrase 'being in love' to indicate platonic love or deep feelings of

friendship. Feelings of brokenness or isolation among asexual individuals have been noted in previous research (e.g., MacNeela and Murphy 2015; Mollet and Lackman 2018), so these findings suggest aromanticism as a possible correlate of, or contributing factor to, such feelings in asexual individuals. When differences in definitions or wording arose in the data, it was when participants noted it in the past tense, with recalled experiences usually being from middle school to early college. College was often a place of increased information and independence where participants were able to learn more about themselves and relevant information on asexuality.

Research question 2 asked how people under the asexual umbrella evaluate different styles of relationships, such as friendships and romance. The findings suggest that this is an area where asexual individuals may both be partially reflective of norms in the general population while also providing new avenues of questioning when considering sexuality as a whole. Some participant responses included appreciating marriage for its ability to generate a sense of stability, while others questioned the reason for its superior position over friendship in society. Interests in long-term relationships appeared to be based in part on whether or not the participant identified as aromantic or some variation of alloromantic, though there remained substantial variation within these categories. Being alloromantic was not a guarantee of desiring marriage, and being aromantic was not a guarantee of being averse to romantic pairing. Due to the variety of answers and positions noted by participants, the ‘consensus to complexity’ phrasing noted by Furstenberg (2014) for heterosexual populations appears to also be applicable to asexual populations to a degree. The increased acceptance of variation in the general population may in part pave the road for culturally accepted alternatives to marriage, whether that be remaining single or another model of long-term connection such as queer platonic relationships (Tessler 2023; Wang and Parker 2014).

Public valuation of romance itself has rarely been questioned in research, though much theorizing has been dedicated to the sexual undercurrent and expectations of society (Gupta 2015; Przybylo 2011). This is partially understandable, as there may be an assumption that there is a shared ordinal valuation around relationship types that would place strangers and acquaintances lower in valuation while socially recognized sexual partners, spouses, and family are placed higher on average. However, the findings of this research suggest that this assumption may be partially misleading for asexual populations and gives the possibility of this being misleading in a more general sense. Romance is often not central to the lives of asexual individuals, yet the sexual and romantic norms of Western society still set the backdrop to their experiences and development as individuals. Indeed, in the current study, this often led aromantic individuals to see dating or romance as 'normal' and acting out the social expectations of dating was a way to be 'normal.' That stated, several participants valued friendship and other forms of long-term relationships over romance. This suggests that the desire for deep and long-term connection is separate from the desire for romance specifically. With this in mind, we should reevaluate the importance of platonic relationships when examining and considering aspects of social life and life course.

In relation to the research question 3, which asked how people under the asexual umbrella navigate social norms surrounding romantic and sexual relationships, findings partly reflected previous research in the pragmatism on the part of asexual individuals (Dawson, McDonnell, and Scott 2016). How participants recalled navigating social expectations in this sample appeared to vary based on their romantic attraction. For non-aromantic participants, several noted feelings of romance being in line with allosexual peers, which could create feelings of social connection for the individual. In contrast, aromantic participants were more likely to

note manufacturing crushes in order to fit in with peer groups. However, though few considered it deeply during the interviews, aromantic participants were more likely to note the risk or fear of lifelong singlehood due to their romantic preferences. This connects to expectations of marriage, which is typically held as a stable relationship and has historically been used as a means of creating stability (Coontz 2006); however, these preferences are connecting to the perceived benefits of marriage rather than the concept of marriage itself. How aromantic individuals came to solutions of such a perceived problem varied: some never noted it as a consideration, some participants had not found a solution, while others found feelings of connection and stability through other social networks. However, further research will be needed to discern the details of how sources of stability and feelings of connection may overlap with, and compare to, the perceived stability of marriage.

**Implications**

These findings have important implications beyond academia. For professionals who work with asexual and general LGBTQ+ populations, the findings of this study suggest that care should be taken to acknowledge the multiple types of attraction that an individual may feel and understand how personal prioritizations of romantic and platonic relationships may not match social norms prioritizing dating and marriage. Likewise, there should be an acknowledgement of potential pressure to be in a sexual or romantic relationship. For social workers, psychologists, and counselors who work with asexual populations, this work reinforces the understandings of previous marriage scholars (e.g., Coontz 2006) by affirming their conclusions that sexual and romantic expectations are shaped by social context even in the experiences of asexual-spectrum individuals. For aromantic-spectrum individuals in particular, effort should be made to allow for

potential alternative solutions for long-term caring relationships. For asexual, alloromantic individuals, working to balance preferences in romantic relationships with sexual and romantic social norms and considering possibilities of sexually open relationships may be more valuable.

**Limitations**

As this was qualitative research, there is a risk that there were too few participants to draw any final conclusions. While the findings appear reflective of growing understandings of the asexuality, further research with larger samples will be needed to confirm findings. Because attitudes about friendship and marriage tend to be based on cultural understandings rather than easily measured criteria, these data may also be limited. Because these data focused on US norms and included only US participants, future work should consider the experiences of asexual populations outside of the US. In addition, there was no allosexual group used for this research to compare views on romantic relationships. Thus, future research might include comparisons between allosexual and asexual-spectrum individuals.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

To summarize, the experiences of romantic relationships for asexual individuals do appear to be different from those of allosexual populations. In the current study, there was a tendency to not perceive any intrinsic benefit to dating; this was more prominent with aromantic participants and often came with a mixture of noting confusion of peers' actions, feelings of disconnection from peers, or occasional manufacturing of crushes. This finding reinforces the idea that asexual, and likely to a greater extent aromantic, individuals do experience romance and romantic activity in a qualitatively different way than other groups do on average. Several participants also compared

friendship to romance, often with a comparison that they were nearly equal in value. The wording and intensity with which this was noted varied by participant, but it questions an assumed primacy of marriage. Further, the importance of self-identified romantic attraction was apparent in this study, adding more evidence to the growing literature that romantic attraction is of importance when examining sexuality.

For further research, including quantitative studies to clarify and confirm the findings presented here is well justified. Questions on valuations of different relationship styles, such as comparing dating, marriage, family, friendships, and others could be used as a means to compare asexual, aromantic, alloromantic, and various allosexual groups in a quantitative manner. Research into the importance of non-sexual family relationships, such as sibling relationships or having children, for asexual individuals may be useful to help understand how family relationships may be valued outside of sexual activity. Qualitative research into the experiential differences of asexual and allosexual populations on the topics of relationships, dating, and perceptions of romance would also allow for a better understanding of the social needs and perceptions of asexual individuals. Further, this style of research could allow for the further understanding of differences and commonalities in the experiences of asexual, heterosexual, and other LGBTQ+ populations.

# Chapter 4: Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model: A Means to Deepen Our Understanding of Attraction

Abstract

Heterogeneity of attraction has recently become a topic of interest for researchers studying asexual-spectrum identities. However, there has been less consideration of how the findings of such research may be applicable outside of asexual populations. In this article, I will examine previous understandings of sexuality and consider how research into asexuality may lead us to better understand how attraction exists in the general population. I will further present the Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model (AOCIM) as a means of building our understandings of differentiated attraction and how attraction may be better described as a combination of orientation and intensity based on contingent factors. I will then use the model as an instrument to explain that the heterogeneity perceived in asexual populations may be far less unusual than people assume, as there may be a similarly deep heterogeneity in non-asexual populations that is being obscured by societal norms surrounding sexual identifications. Further, I use understandings from the AOCIM as a basis to construct a battery of survey items which can compare differing attraction orientations and contingent intensities across the asexual-spectrum, non-asexual LGBTQ+, and non-LGBTQ+ populations.

Keywords: asexuality, sexual theory, sexual attraction, romantic attraction, differentiated attraction

## Introduction

As a society, we are taught that to love a 'person of the opposite sex' is to desire romance, and that romantic activities precede sexual acts. Marriage is currently taught to be for the purpose of sexual-romantic love (Coontz 2006), and dyadic, amorous, and marital relationships are favored over all other forms of caring relationships (Brake 2012). Heteronormative expectations send the message that 'boy meets girl' is shorthand for how the male-bodied and the female-bodied individual are expected to seek primarily romantic-sexual relationships, with all other relationships needing to be asterisked with 'family' or 'platonic' love to demarcate other forms of affection (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Sex and romance are presented as two sides of a single coin that are valued above friendships and other connections. Yet all of these social expectations regarding sexual and romantic relationships have become increasingly at odds with findings from the asexuality community and asexuality research circles, including Chapter 2 of this dissertation, which have all provided significant evidence that definitions of sexuality and romanticism are no longer universal nor synonymous (Sennkestra 2020; Winer 2024a). Indeed, the existence of differentiated forms of attraction is becoming a widely acknowledged explanation for experiences among the asexual community and among asexuality researchers, with upwards of 90% of the asexual community having noted knowledge of its existence (Ace Community Survey Team 2023). Further, as argued in Chapter 3 and by Brake (2012), the social hierarchy which places sexual-romantic relationships over friendships and similarly caring bonds is not universal. As I and other researchers (e.g., Winer 2024) have argued, these findings from asexuality research are likely to be highly relevant to non-asexual populations.

This article has four goals. First, it will synthesize previous understandings of sexual attraction and consider the Western societal expectations included in those understandings.

Second, it will conduct an examination of the increasingly complex understandings of attraction that have been developed by the asexual community and asexuality researchers. Of particular note to this will be *differentiated attraction*, which was developed by the asexual community in part as an explanation for the tendency for people to experience sexual, romantic, and other attractions differently, such as experiencing romantic attraction separated from sexual attraction (see: Sennkestra 2020). In this section, I will further consider how the concept both disrupts and can further our theoretical understandings of attraction at a more fundamental level. As asexuality has been the source of much of the new information and theory on sexual attraction, it will be a primary angle this paper will use, but the arguments will be more focused on broader understandings of sexuality. Third, I will put forth a theoretical model that builds on our current understandings of differentiated attraction, which I am calling the *Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model* (AOCIM). This model both differentiates forms of attraction and further separates attraction into two component parts which I am labeling *Attraction Orientation* and *Contingent Intensity.* Using this model, I will further argue why asexuality is not a radical concept and does not exist in opposition to other sexualities as argued by some theorists (e.g., Chasin 2013; Przybylo 2011). Fourth, I will end with suggesting a battery of survey items intended to help researchers synthesize disparate understandings of sexual, romantic, and other attractions into a more comprehensive and versatile understanding of attraction.

**Understanding and Engaging with Social Expectations of Attraction**

Attempts to understand attraction can be found throughout human history, with even ancient Greece having terms that typically translate to differentiating sexual-romantic attraction (Eros) from the platonic love of friendship or brotherly love (Philia), filial love (Storge), and an

unconditional love towards other humans (Agape). Comparatively more recent attempts to understand attraction through science have led to works such as the development of the Kinsey Scale, which included a spectrum from “Fully Heterosexual” to “Fully Homosexual,” with degrees of bisexuality between the noted options (Kinsey et al. 1948). This scale presented a highly simplified concept of sexuality and did not largely allow for consideration of sexual interest outside of that towards men and/or women. However, Kinsey et al.’s (1948) work did include “X” as a means of indicating “no socio-sexual contacts or reactions” for the scale, which is one of the earliest scales to consider what would now be considered forms of asexuality or non-sexuality. Decades later, the Storms Model (Storms 1980) proposed a two-dimensional measure along the axes of hetero-eroticism and homo-eroticism. Being low on both placed an individual in the asexual quadrant, while being high on both placed them in the bisexual quadrant. While these examples are common and even foundational, I argue that the traits that have historically been excluded are indicative of how restrictive the definitions used for attraction have been. Each of these examples did not separate sexual and romantic attractions, did not consider attraction based on conventionally non-sexual characteristics such intelligence (e.g., sapiosexuality), and did not account for sexual attraction outside of that directed towards men or women. However, they remain a decent comparison for the basics of how modern individuals perceive sexuality.

Understandings of sexuality are inevitably dependent on the cultures they are developed in, and these models were made in Western cultures where heterosexual marriage for the purpose of love has been normalized since the late 1700s (Coontz 2006). While there have been a variety of ways this has manifested, ranging from the culturally monolithic ideas of the nuclear family in the 1950s in the United States to the shift from “consensus to complexity” in regard to family

formation (Furstenberg 2014), there have been trends in Western society which have prioritized the belief that dyadic, amorous, marital relationships are a universal goal and "[t]he belief that companionate romantic love have special value leads to overlooking the value of other caring relationships" (Brake 2012:88). With these assumptions of love being a universal goal and this prioritization of specific kinds of romantic-sexual relationships as the backdrop, it is not surprising that the models on sexual attraction would reflect such norms to the exclusion of other forms of attraction. Likewise, as availability of online information spreads, and cultures subsequently change, it may be expected that these norms are being challenged in more modern understandings.

That noted, modern society is arguably suffused with sexuality; from industries surrounding cosmetics to heightened expectations of beauty for women and/or heterosexual conquest for men, society places gendered sexual expectations on the members of that society (Przybylo 2011). Further, sexuality as a concept is assumed to be both omnipresent and compulsory (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015), with the specific types of sexual and romantic expectations contributing to the maintenance of a heteronormativity that prioritizes gender-normative, heterosexual relationships over other forms of attraction or enactments of gender (Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Variation does exist, as one family's expectations may differ from their neighbors and one friend's or relative's priorities may be different from another. This is likely because, as Przybylo noted, these expectations do not manifest as a manicured checklist or rubric of expectations agreed upon by members of a society, rather it is "dispersed, scattered, incoherent, but nonetheless organized around conceptualizations of the sexual imperative" (Przybylo 2011:14). Likewise, there is no singular force within a society policing the enactment of particular manifestations of sexuality; as such, while there are standards and

expectations, individuals may face multiple standards which are not consistent, measured, or clear.

Despite the lack of coherency, each culture will connect concepts of normativity or deviancy to specific identifications (Worthen 2016). This is often manifested in both culture and in scientific research. In regards to science presenting non-sexuality as deviant, early Western sexologists labeled a lack of "Sexual instinct" as "Anæsthesia Sexualis" (Krafft-Ebing and Chaddock 1893:42), which the authors further claimed was universally connected to having cerebral disturbances and states of psychical and physical degeneration. Modern derogatory examples exist for asexuality and non-sexuality as well, which have been equated to medical disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder and described as something that should be 'fixed' through treatments such as testosterone injections (Bogaert 2015b; Gupta 2017b:2).

There is some evidence that these expectations towards compulsory heterosexuality have lessened somewhat over time, as research has consistently found that the marriage of same-sex couples has been increasingly normalized (Armenia and Troia 2017; Kent 2020; Risman 2018); however, these expectations seem to have largely been from cultural shifts in acceptance or understanding around the diversity of sexual orientations rather than an increased understanding of the nuance between differing types of attraction.

**Asexuality and how it Disentangles the Multiple Aspects of Attraction**

In general, asexuality is a sexual identity defined by having no feelings of sexual attraction. Similar terms, such as asexual-spectrum or asexual-umbrella, tend to refer to a variety of sexualities that are described by having little-to-no attraction towards sexual activity. Common variations of this range of sexual identities include individuals who have sexual attraction only

after an emotional bond has already been established (demisexual) or only having attraction in rare instances or low intensity (gray-sexuality). It is also within the asexuality community and research that concepts of differentiated attraction and related concepts, such as the split attraction model, have been examined and used (Sennkestra 2020; Winer 2024a). This paper will use differentiated attraction for the purpose of nuance, though the terms differentiated attraction and the split attraction model have been argued to be similar enough as to be interchangeable in most circumstances (Winer 2024a). The theory behind differentiated attraction is that various attractions such as sexual, romantic, sensual, and aesthetic attractions may be differentiated from each other. Each attraction is not guaranteed to be differentiated, existing in the same direction, or existing in the same intensity. As such, where one person may simultaneously experience demisexual sexual attraction towards men, alloromantic romantic attraction towards both men and women, and further may perceive their aesthetic or sensual attractions as not differentiated from their other attractions. The usage of differentiated attraction and the split attraction model have become widespread among asexual populations and is increasingly being used in academic asexuality literature (e.g., Tessler and Winer 2023; Winer 2024; Winer et al. 2024).

That increasing commonality noted, this theory-crafting in asexual circles has not always been reflected in research. Some researchers have questioned whether the experiences of self-identified asexuals would be better described through a sexual dysfunction or paraphilia (Brotto and Yule 2017), though most researchers have agreed that it does exist as a legitimate sexuality separate from such conditions (Gupta 2017b). Others have doubted its orientation status by questioning if it meets a stability criterion (Cranney 2017), as asexuality to appear less consistent than other sexualities and as individuals can have variation in their answers to quantitative scales of asexuality over time (Su and Zheng 2023). However, this may also be seen as indicative of the

heterogeneity of experiences in asexual populations which have been noted by researchers (e.g., Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015; Scherrer, 2008; Winer et al., 2024). Chapter 2 of this dissertation further noted this tendency and a possibility that variations in self-identification under the asexual umbrella may also come from a lack of certainty stemming from personal experience and application of the subtle nuances between, for instance, asexuality and demisexuality. This may be in part because self-identification can be a complicated sociopsychological process that can be overwhelming (Howard 2000), and in part because all language will inevitably be constructed within a system of imperfect communication. As such, while arguing over the specific details of whether asexuality is an orientation can lead to nuance in understanding, rejection of its status due to minutiae of terminology is ill advised as such terminology was likely formed in social context where such specificity was not granted to the topic. Each of these arguments noted, most researchers treat asexuality as a valid orientation, not only for its explanation of experiences for those who identify as asexual but also, as Chasin (2017) noted, due to the sociopolitical nature of the construction of sexual orientations:

> In some sense, asexuality functions as a meta-category positioned in opposition to non-aceness; in some sense, it functions as a unique sexual orientation category in opposition to other sexual orientations; and, in some sense, it does both simultaneously, and/or neither. Sexual orientation is a sociopolitical category and whether and how asexuality qualifies will depend on sociopolitical context. (Chasin 2017:663)

I agree with Chasin's argument that sexualities inherently include sociopolitical arguments and should be considered in context, but I will argue against the view that asexuality is an oppositional category. Further, I argue for the reconceptualization of the concept of sexual orientation and I put forward that our understanding of sexuality will be improved if we consider orientation as one facet of sexuality rather than a synonym of it.

To that end, I have put together a conceptualization which uses a combination of current understandings of sexuality literature, my own findings noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, and positions noted by the asexuality community. To this purpose, I propose and explain the following Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model (AOCIM) as a means of providing nuance to our understandings of sexual, romantic, and other forms of attraction:

<Insert Figure 1>

This model pieces together several findings that have risen as part of research into asexuality but have otherwise remained disparate. To begin with the top of the model, differentiated attractions are given priority over concepts of orientation. This is directly intended to build on current understandings of differentiated attraction which have come out of the collective knowledge and academic discourse surrounding the asexual community (Sennkestra 2020; Winer 2024a), which refers to where individuals note that their experiences of attraction may be differentiated across two or more categories. In this model, sexual and romantic attractions are noted as they are the most commonly considered forms of differentiated attraction (e.g., Clark and Zimmerman 2022; Diamond 2003), though research into romantic attraction is still in its nascent stages. This model further reflects differentiated attraction by noting both that 1) there can be additional types of attraction beyond sexual and romantic and 2) attractions are not differentiated in the same way for all individuals. Regarding the first point, other forms of attraction have been noted by individuals in the LGBTQ+ and asexual communities. Other common inclusions are *Aesthetic Attraction* (e.g., appreciation of someone's physical appearance even without having sexual/romantic attraction towards them) and *Sensual Attraction* (e.g., desiring or appreciating the physical touch of the people one is attracted to). There are limitless

ways to differentiate attraction in theory, though taking an overly granular approach is both unwieldy to use in practice and unlikely to be a useful means of understanding the experiences of most individuals. This conundrum is in part addressed by the second point, attractions are not differentiated the same way for all individuals. For instance, research has had several asexual individuals note that they perceived their sexual and romantic attractions as the same experience (Ace Community Survey Team 2023); likewise, a person may experience sensual attraction as a part of romantic or sexual attraction. Indeed, acts such as sexual foreplay could be argued to appeal to multiple forms of attraction. This may cause an individual to perceive it as appealing according to their experiences of sexual, romantic, and/or sensual attractions. It is possible for individuals to describe the feelings of attraction separately, but it is also possible that all of the forms of attraction involved are *not* differentiated and are experienced as a single feeling.

Moving on to the next part of the model, I argue that instances of attraction, whether they be sexual, romantic, or another form of attraction, can be separated into two component parts: *Attraction Orientation* and *Contingent Intensity*. Using sexual attraction as an example, sexual attraction orientation refers to the groups, traits, individuals, or concepts that an individual is sexually attracted towards. This description is intuitive for orientations such as heterosexuality and bisexuality, but I argue that asexuality could also be included under this terminology. Paraphrasing Chasin's (2017) logic, to state one is asexual is the equivalent of stating that one is orientated away from all other options or has no attraction to speak of. This is the metaphorical equivalent of answering a question on what you desire for dinner with "I'm not hungry," you still have a preference for an option, but that preference is to not have food. In addition to allowing consideration of asexuality, the AOCIM can allow for the consideration of other non-traditional sexual orientations. For instance, *sapiosexuality*, sexual attraction based on the intelligence of

others, is usually not considered due to its rarity and non-adherence to cultural norms of sexual orientation based on reproductive organs or penetrative sexual acts; however, this conceptualization is meant to include all potential sources of sexual attraction and could include intelligence as a potential option. The AOCIM would consider any form of sexual attraction to be valid for the purposes of determining sexual orientation. Further, sexual orientations should not be considered mutually exclusive. For instance, an individual may feel attraction towards multiple groups without feeling an attraction towards all groups, such as being attracted towards women and nonbinary folk but not men. I used a multidirectional orientation, bisexual, as an example sexual orientation in the AOCIM, but this is primarily due to common usage of bisexuality and it should be noted that orientations are not generally mutually exclusive.

The complementing component of *Attraction Orientation* is *Contingent Intensity*. Using sexuality as an example again, *Contingent Intensity* is the degree or intensity of feeling associated with one's attraction towards the people, concepts, and/or other considerations noted by their sexual orientation and contingent factors. Intensity is relatively straightforward, as it could include higher intensities such as allosexuality or lower intensities such as gray-sexuality or asexuality. Though it is straightforward, it is still a vital aspect of understanding sexuality as there is evidence that other factors, such as age, may lead to variations in sexual desire vary over time due to biological, psychological, and sociological factors (DeLamater and Sill 2005; Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 2009). As such, understandings of attraction with the AOCIM should be assumed to have a degree of fluidity as self-identification and self-interpretation of attractions may naturally vary some over time due to sociocultural circumstances for an individual. The inclusion of contingent factors is two-fold. First, it accounts for existing identities, such as demisexuality, which note that sexual attraction is contingent on an emotional

bond already being in place. As such, demisexuality would not be considered an attraction orientation as there is no implicit directionality in its definition; however, it would be a contingent intensity to be used alongside orientations. Second, the inclusion of contingent intensities allows an acknowledgement of typically ignored factors when discussing orientation, such as assuming friends are excluded from feelings of sexual attraction. This second instance is more to account for the wide variety of contingent factors than to list each as part of the model, as such contingents would be both commonly relevant and commonly assumed to exist without acknowledgement. Exceptions certainly exist and should be explored in future research.

Combining *Attraction Orientation* and *Contingent Intensity*, anyone could be noted as having multiple aspects of their sexual or other attractions. To make it explicit, this includes non-LGBTQ+, heterosexual populations. Many such individuals could be described as 'heterosexual, allosexual' using this metric. That noted, asexuality has a somewhat redundant role in this metric that needs further explanation. Asexuality could be considered a form of contingent intensity as it refers to a zero-intensity attraction in sexual activity, but it also could be noted as a sexual orientation as it describes the type of individual that one is sexually attracted to (i.e., no one). As such, an honest identification using this conceptualization would be that an asexual person would be considered "asexual, asexual" for their sexual orientation and contingent intensity, respectively. Such a label can obviously be considered redundant, but that is because using asexuality (or similar terms for non-attraction, such as aromantic) commonly acts as a "Not Applicable" response.

**Theoretical Importance of the AOCIM, and Arguments that Asexuality Redefines Without Breaking Rules**

There has been the argument that asexuality is, in some way, inherently radical because it goes against the expected norms of society. At the surface level, many of these proposals of the radical 'nature' of asexuality make some sense. There are also instances of people engaging in celibacy and claiming sexual identities for political reasons, as Fahs (2010) pointed to individuals identifying as asexual as a means of engaging in a radically feminist act or as a tactic of anarchist sexual politics against patriarchal structures. This tendency was described less as an innate or internal sense of sexual identification, but instead reflective of the social construction of sexuality within a culture that normalized restrictive sexual norms, as Fahs noted that "[a]sexuality became the outcome of sex rather than an identity that originated early in life" (2010:452). This suggests usage was more strongly a socio-political stance being used as a method similar to that of women who identified as lesbian or bisexual not strictly due to sexual attraction but as a mixture of interest and as a form of resistance against patriarchal norms and systems of power (Stein 1997). Such identifications are still valid, as sexuality is a social construct and an element in power relations (Foucault 1990) which can have connections to sociopolitical realities (Chasin 2017). That noted, such realities have complicated definitions of asexuality and there have been efforts to parse out the experiences of self-identified asexuals from individuals who do not feel attraction due to traumatic experiences or medical conditions (Bogaert 2015a; Brotto and Yule 2017).

For those arguing for the radical nature of self-identified asexuality, researchers have presented some arguments. Przybylo argued that asexuality is a "stabilizing force" (Przybylo 2011) as it can unify or strengthen people with other sexualities against it:

> [asexuality] functions to stabilize sexuality because it incites new discourse of sexuality, coercing us into a defence of sexuality; we become sexuality's defendants against the potential threat of asexuality. To be asexual, for a subject of sexusociety, is to be 'afun', to be boring, to be a prude: a thought-cluster that reveals our deep attachments to sexuality and our eagerness to fight on its behalf. (Przybylo 2011:452)

Przybylo's arguments are notably rare among asexuality scholars and, despite notes of asexuality being a "stabilizing force," the argument seems to present asexual individuals as straw-man radical opponents which only stabilize 'defendant' non-asexual populations. Chasin (2013), makes a counterpoint, arguing that as too many scholars and philosophers have argued that sexuality is inherently superior, asexual populations should not let others define them and instead accept their own radical nature to define themselves. This may disrupt sociopolitical norms around sexuality and suggests that, as asexuality becomes more normalized in some areas, there is more potential for the concept to develop as it comes into contact with wider audiences (Chasin 2017).

Those arguments noted, suggestions of the 'radical potential' of asexuality have run into conflict with the lived experiences of asexual populations at times. Scholars have repeatedly noted that asexual populations appear to be highly heterogenous in their specific identities (Carrigan 2011; Chasin 2015; Scherrer 2008; Winer et al. 2024) and feel comparatively disconnected from other LGBTQ+ groups and organizations (Dawson et al. 2018; Worthen and Laljer 2021). Some scholars have assumed that the asexual population is fractured but seeking community as a whole (Colborne 2018) but, while there are certainly some asexual-focused groups forming (e.g., AVEN and various social media groups), there is also evidence that the asexual population is less connected to their sexual identity relative to other groups (Dawson et al. 2018). As Dawson et al. (2018) have noted, it is problematic to assign the concept of asexuality its own will, as asexual individuals appear less likely than other LGBTQ+ groups to

feel that their sexuality is a central part of their identity. As Bogaert (2015b) has put it, there is less reason for people to come out or put on public displays for an identity they do not see as highly relevant to themselves; one uninterested in golf would not join a club for 'non-golfers,' so why would those uninterested in sex join an asexual club? While there are reasons for asexual individuals to join such groups, especially given the pervasiveness of sexual expectations in society, the question does give some reasoning as to why asexual populations tend to be less enthusiastic for large groups or activism when compared to other LGBTQ+ groups.

This leaves asexuality in an unusual space. In many ways, the actions and inactions associated with it appear to be a radical denial of socially constructed norms: Not engaging in or seeking sex comes into conflict with hierarchical masculine concepts around heterosexuality (Kimmel 1994), it goes against media narratives suffused with romantic subplots and marketing to sell cosmetics (Przybylo 2011), it denies societal expectations on family formation and the cultural norms which set romantic-sexual love is a central part of humanity (Coontz 2006). Yet, in practice, there is little to say of any larger social movement or unified desire from the community beyond educating people on the existence of asexuality (Dawson et al. 2018). To that end, I argue that asexuality is *not* a radical concept. Instead, I argue that asexuality does *not* disrupt the norm as all elements of asexuality already exist in separate elements of the wider culture. While asexual populations have been described as heterogenous due to self-identifying with varieties of sexual, romantic, and other attraction-based identities, I argue that this is predominantly due to society not recognizing the heterogeneity in non-asexual populations.

To start, it is often learning about asexuality that leads asexual-spectrum individuals to reflect on their various other attractions, such as romantic identity. An individual typically first learns they are asexual through encountering and feeling connection to asexual individuals,

concepts, or ideas, and then afterwards reflecting on their own identities; it is only afterward that individuals learn about the definitions for their romantic attraction. With that in mind, non-asexual populations do not typically question their romantic or other attraction-based identities as social norms on self-describing attraction prioritize sexual identity (e.g., straight, gay, etc.) and thus, they avoid more nuanced considerations of romantic, sensual, aesthetic, or other attractions. Even among sexually-attracted people, the default is straight as is allosexual. This can be illustrated in the gay person's quip back to the straight person who asks the question "How did you know you were gay?" with "How did you know you were straight?" Similarly, an asexual person might respond to an allosexual person who asks the question "How did you know you were asexual?" with "How did you know you were allosexual?" It is also important to understand there may be a tendency towards simplicity in attraction-based self-identifications for even many asexual individuals. As noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, some asexual individuals find that umbrella terms such as "asexual-spectrum" are close enough to describing their identity to work, while other individuals may feel burdened by the variety of options. For asexual people in particular, this may be in part because they are less invested on average in any specific identity such as demisexual or gray-sexual; however, it may also be due to the fact that relevant feelings of attraction cannot be examined under a microscope or measured with a ruler. That stated, what would happen if we were to take this understanding of the complications of self-exploration of attraction-based identities and proceed to expand it to the broader society, where knowledge of relevant terminology is sparse and there remains a culture that favors identification with broad heteronormative terminology? It could be expected that non-asexual populations would have a distinct preference towards understanding attraction-based self-identification through existing sexuality-based labels without further consideration of other

attractions. The underlying heterogeneity would still be present, but it could remain obscured without the instigating factor of asexuality leading individuals to self-reflect on their other attractions. This tactic is similar to Judith Butler's (2004) approach of exploring intersex individuals as a way of exposing the social construction of both gender and sex. By exploring asexual individuals' experiences, we are better able to create tools that allow us to deconstruct the allosexual individuals' experiences.

As I have noted above with the AOCIM, sexuality can be broken down into component parts of *Attraction Orientation* and *Contingent Intensity*. This conceptualization bridges the gap between asexuality and other sexualities. It does not take a researcher to find people of nearly any sexuality who prefer sexual activity over romantic activity, or to find people where the reverse is true. To give an example, 'Hookup' apps and cultures around one-night-stands are far from new, yet their existence reinforces that desire for sex does not always equate to desire for long-term romance. To give another example, if someone said they preferred long-term romantic involvement over short-term sexual pleasure, few would argue the desire as strange. These are not foreign concepts to the general public. With that in mind, there are likely variations and heterogeneity in experience of attractions within any population.

This overlaps with variations of asexuality; after all, it could be argued that a man who is actively attracted to sex and enjoys sexual activity with women but has no taste for romantic attachment may be an 'aromantic, allosexual heterosexual.' However, he would likely be described simply as 'straight' by conventional standards. Asexuality would not likely be applied to the person, so he would likely not be incentivized to reflect on his romantic identity, and so identities regarding aromanticism are likely to be ignored. The possibility of heterogeneity is blanketed over by the homogenizing labels of sexuality. The terms asexual, demisexual,

aromantic, gray-romantic, and similar terminology may be new to the general population, but variation in experience is far from new. This line of thinking suggests that asexuality is not a source of heterogeneity, but instead suggests that cultures which center self-descriptions around sexuality may obscure the presence and contingent intensity of other attraction-based variations within an individual's identity.

**Applying Intensity, Suggestions on Reorganizing Demographic Survey Questions**

To the goal of furthering our understanding of attractions and applying the AOCIM, I have developed a battery of recommended survey questions (Appendix A) that allows the researcher to compare orientation and intensity across four commonly recognized[3] types of attraction: Sexual, Romantic, Aesthetic, and Sensual. These survey questions apply to all populations and allows researchers to compare asexual-spectrum, non-asexual LGBTQ+, and heterosexual populations across attractions. These survey items are not intended to replace existing metrics such as the Asexuality Identification Scale (Yule et al. 2015), but rather allow for a comparison of subjective, self-identified attraction orientation and contingent intensity. The survey questions are primarily broken down into three distinct parts: 1) Self-identification of attraction orientation(s), 2) Contingent intensity of feeling towards noted orientation(s), and 3) Subjective comparisons of attraction orientations as separate from each other.

Using the included battery of questions in Appendix A, questions Q1a, Q2a, Q3a, and Q4a are a multiple choice selection meant to be reflective of common presentations of questions regarding sexuality and use terminology that is easily understood by people uninformed on

[3] As noted earlier, there are theoretically infinite dimensions of attraction. However, to keep this tool to a usable length, only the four most commonly recognized types are considered. Types of attraction outside of Sexual, Romantic, Aesthetic, and Sensual are acknowledged as possible but not typically considered even in the asexual community.

LGBTQ+ and asexuality-related topics. In order to begin separating specific attractions, the questions include instructions for the respondent to respectively consider only the sexual, only the romantic, only the aesthetic, and only the sensual aspects of their preferences. This specification is included to attempt to avoid generalizations and overlap between self-perceptions of different attractions. Further, while my theoretical argument is that few orientations are mutually exclusive, I include multiple-orientation terms such as bisexuality and pansexuality as they remain common identifications among LGBTQ+ populations. However, I do include the instruction to 'select all that apply' as a means of allowing for other combinations of multiple-orientation attractions. For the romantic, aesthetic, and sensual orientation questions with Q2a, Q3a, and Q4a, terminology is adjusted to using appropriate "-romantic," "-aesthetic," and "-sensual" terms instead of "-sexual," but are otherwise presented in a mirrored fashion in order to ease understanding for people unfamiliar with the terminology separating each type of attraction from sexual attraction. Notably, while orientations such as asexuality and aromantic terms are included as options, demisexual, gray-sexual, and other contingent intensity-based identities are not included in this section. This is done to encourage individuals who are on the asexual-, aromantic-, a-aesthetic, or asensual-spectrums of identities to select their preferred orientation-based options if available. An 'other:' option is included for individuals who experience less common attractions, though this may also be a point of concern if the section is potentially used for gray-sexual because, as noted above, such identities would be considered contingent intensity-based identifications and not orientations. However, this possibility is in part why questions Q1b, Q2b, Q3b, and Q4b are included as connected to questions Q1a, Q2a, Q3a, and Q4a. Presenting the orientation question followed immediately by the contingent intensity

question is intended to reinforce that these are paired questions and are asking different aspects of attractions.

For the intensity-based questions of Q1b, Q2b, Q3b, and Q4b, I use 7-point Likert-scales ranging from “Minimally/Not Interested” to “Highly Interested.” This is a highly simplified manner of presenting intensity of attractions that is primarily focused on being understandable to people uninformed on asexuality-related terminology. Presenting a larger diversity of contingent intensity-based identities in this section may cause problems in developing a question coherent to all populations. As such, questions regarding conditional attractions such as demisexuality, where attraction is contingent on an emotional bond being present, are excluded from this section. However, consideration of conditional attractions will be noted later. There is a further strength with using the 7-point Likert-scale, as it allows for the consideration of both low-intensity identities, such as asexuality, and higher-than-average intensities of attractions.

After the orientation- and simplified contingent intensity-questions is an ordinal ranking question which asks respondents to order what attractions are subjectively more intense in their experience. This is included to encourage respondents to reflect on differences between sexual, romantic, aesthetic, and sensual attractions before reflecting on similarities and potentially defaulting to presenting their attraction-related intensities as equivalent. The question further allows for respondents to give consideration of differentiated attraction, even if the terminology for differentiated attraction is not used, by allowing respondents to set each type of attraction as ordinally equal to other attractions. An understanding that has come up in the asexual community is that differentiated attractions may not apply to everyone (Sennkestra 2020); as such, I found it prudent to include a question that reflected this understanding that not all individuals experience differentiated attractions. If significant portions of non-asexual populations feel that their sexual,

romantic, aesthetic, or sensual attractions differ in intensity or orientation, then such findings would be evidence that cultural tendencies that centralize sexuality may be obscuring a deeper heterogeneity of experiences in other populations.

Q6 through Q9 consider orientation through the lens of gender. As noted in the AOCIM, feelings of attractions are not restricted to simple labels such as “Straight.” “Gay,” or “Bisexual,” as attraction orientations are not mutually exclusive. Similarly, there is little reason to assume that contingent intensities of attraction will be equal for each category of person a respondent is attracted to. For instance, a person may be slightly attracted to women but highly attracted towards men. This potential complexity is examined through a series of questions which ask the respondent to note their specified interest in each group. Q6 through Q9 repeat this consideration of gender-specific attractions for each sexual, romantic, aesthetic, and sensual types of attractions. An “other gender” option given for thoroughness and possibility of attraction towards specific genders outside those noted in the list.

Q10 through Q13 bring up specific categories for contingent intensity of attraction. This is where contingent intensities such as gray-sexuality or demiromanticism are considered. These questions allow for the consideration of gray- (rare or infrequent attraction), demi-(attraction after an emotional bond has been established), sapio-(attraction towards intelligence), cupio-(does not feel interest in the attraction, but enjoys the relationship for other reasons), and aego-(enjoys the idea of the attraction, but does not want to be involved in a relationship with the attraction). There is further the option to note that no such term applies and the option for other contingent factors. However, while this is a thorough consideration, there are potential points of friction with these questions. Notably, while the gray- and demi- prefixes can be used with each root word of sexual, romantic, aesthetic, and sensual to reflect known experiences, not all of the

prefix terms are used in such ways. For instance, terms like “sapioaesthetic” (aesthetic attraction to intelligence) and “cupiosensual” (no sensual attraction, but still enjoys sensual relationships) do not appear to be in use. As such, Q10 and Q11 will each give possible gray-, demi-, sapio-, cupio-, and aego- variations for sexual and romantic attractions. Q12 and Q13 will only give the more commonly recognized gray- and demi- prefixes as options for aesthetic and sensual interests; however, the option for “other” is included and would allow for further specificity. The option for “none of these apply” is given for the individuals who may see none of these terms as reflective of their experience. A potential concern is that few of these terms are common in the general population and some of these terms, such as sapio-, cupio-, and aego- types of attraction, are rarely noted even in asexuality groups. To address this, short definitions are provided to assist with legibility of the survey items, which should lower the risk of lack of familiarity leading some respondents to misunderstanding of the meaning of these terms. That noted, if significant portions of the general population select these terms as valid to their experiences when given definitions, then such a finding could be strong evidence of the heterogeneity of experiences with the potential contingencies related to feelings of attraction.

**Moving Forward**

If the *Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model* is reflective of reality, then it is highly possible that much of the heterogeneity of experiences that researchers are finding with asexual populations can inform our understandings of non-asexual populations. It is common knowledge that people have differences in regard to the types of relationships they enjoy or desire, yet our field still commonly correlates sexual and romantic attractions for most non-asexual populations. I believe that it is time that scholars test that assumed equivalence and

reexamine how such differences in orientation, contingent intensity, and layers of attractions may affect all populations. Much progress has been made in recent years in the study of sexuality, but I believe that our field is ready to reexamine the foundations of our science. To this, I argue that we should not be beholden to assumptions of homogeneity of sexual and romantic experience and should test our basic understandings of the diversity of experience within our culture.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

## Summary of Findings

This dissertation set out to further our understanding of asexuality through the consideration of sexual attraction and romantic attraction as separate concepts. To that end, the research conducted as part of this dissertation has contributed to our collective understanding that romantic attraction is a vital component of understanding the experiences of asexual populations, and that the importance in variations in romantic attraction should, at least on a theoretical level, be applicable to the general population. Previous research has touched on the importance of romantic attraction (e.g., Antonsen et al. 2020; Winer 2024a) and the findings of this dissertation affirm that romantic attraction should be considered as an important factor due to the potential correlations in experience described by participants in this research.

In Chapter 2, qualitative comparisons between participants indicated that experiences varied more substantially by romantic attraction than by sexual attraction. In regard to sexual attraction, some participants noted a lack of clarity of their definition as specifically being asexual or demisexual, though that specific finding was not universal. Further, participants who identified as alloromantic were more likely to have a sense of shared experiences with allosexual friends, which brings the novel finding that romantic attraction may be a source of shared experiences in social situations where discussions of dating or crushes may be involved. This is compared to the findings with aromantic participants, who were more likely to question the prioritization of such bonds in their social networks. Perhaps due to this increased feeling of friction between social expectations and personal experiences, aromantic participants also noted a further sense of relief and a more positive affect and validation of their identity when learning the terminology associated with asexuality and romantic attraction.

The comparisons in Chapter 2 do have some caveats which will be useful points to consider for later research. Notably, the comparison was using a smaller variation of sexual attraction compared to the larger variation of romantic attraction of the participants. Sexual attractions were all asexual-spectrum and could be seen as being relatively close to each other when compared to the wider variety of aromantic-spectrum and alloromantic identities. However, as little research has considered romantic attraction in direct comparisons such as this, the finding that romantic attraction may be more important to the lived experiences of individuals in any situation is still a distinct and substantial finding. Researchers have increasingly noted the possible importance of romantic attraction (e.g., Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022), and each of the findings in Chapter 2 bring new information to contribute to both the current literature on asexuality and the to the broader consideration of the importance of romantic attraction.

Chapter 3 built upon the findings in Chapter 2 regarding norms of talking about romance and examined attraction from the angle of the social norms around caring relationships. Participants varied substantially in regard to personal experience and their interpretations of their experiences, ranging from feelings of self-doubt or failure for not achieving social expectations regarding sexual activity or dating, to feeling they were “watching a different movie” from the way they experienced attraction and the way their friends described feelings of attraction. Feelings of disconnect for asexual individuals have been noted before in research (Vares 2018), but the findings here provide nuances that suggest that romance may play a larger factor than previously known in how sexual activity is perceived. In particular, alloromantic participants noted mixing up the vague descriptions sometimes accompanying sexual discussion and interpreted the sexually-coded language of attractiveness with non-sexual evaluations, such as a

person being “hot” to mean a person who was interesting to be around or had a sense of humor. This finding suggests that sexual language and expectations of society which have so often been noted in asexuality research (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015; Przybylo 2011) may be a more complex system of expectations where typically private sexual activities are filtered through public displays of romantic activities. The other findings of Chapter 3 reinforce this possibility, as multiple participants recalled the importance of dating or display of romantic activity in order to appear “normal” in social circumstances while growing up. In some cases, this involved participants manufacturing crushes or forcing themselves to seek sexual activity which they noted actively hating.

Chapter 3 further brought to question how romantic bonds compared to non-romantic caring bonds, such as friendships. Several participants noted gauging any possible benefits of romance against the benefits of friendships, only to consider there to be little difference in the possible benefits. One participant explicitly critiqued social norms around prioritizing romance over friendships. This particular finding was reflective of research into amatonormativity, a concept by Brake (2012), which argues how society prioritizes dyadic amorous relationships over others forms of caring relationships. However, amatonormativity has not often been considered central in asexuality literature. The findings of both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 suggest that further consideration of how sexual and romantic expectations are maintained and prioritized in a society would be productive in the understanding of experiences of asexual and aromantic populations.

Chapters 2 and 3 reinforced the importance of romantic attraction and the consideration of sexual and romantic attractions as important to distinguish, which affirms the considerations of recent asexuality research (e.g., Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022; Tessler and Winer 2023; Winer

2024). Differentiated attraction as a concept and the Split Attraction Model both are used for this purpose; however, in considering the findings of the research in these chapters, these conceptualizations of how attraction could be differentiated appeared somewhat lacking. Variations in sexual and romantic identity were important, but the wordings given suggested that some nuance was being lost. For instance, variation often appeared in regard to comparing demiromantic to alloromantic, but to call such a variation based on romantic orientation could be considered an odd wording, as it had nothing to do with what kind of person the participant was romantically attracted to and was based on the style or intensity of attraction the individual experienced. Phrasings and the consideration of asexuality as an orientation are far from new (e.g., Brotto and Yule 2017), but I argued that the best solution was to construct a new model informed by current understandings of differentiated attraction and expanded to further describe the variations observable in Chapters 2 and 3.

This logically led to Chapter 4 and the development of the *Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model*, which split the directionality aspects of attraction from the intensity aspects of attraction. The model is seen in Figure 1. The model considered attraction as a multifaceted experience, and separated direction- and orientation-focused aspects of attraction from the contingent- and intensity-focused aspects. The goal was to make the model versatile, being as easily applied to asexual populations as it could be to any LGBTQ+ or other allosexual population. Further, it built on the understanding of differentiated attraction and considered the possibility of sexual, romantic, and other attractions as being differentiated for only a portion of the population. Further testing will be required to validate this theoretical understanding of attraction, and this model will be testable through additional research into populations of various

sexual and romantic identities. To further this, the AOCIM survey questions in Appendix A were constructed as an early example on what such a test would look like.

**Implications of Findings**

Research into asexuality and variations of romantic attraction are still nascent and, as such, almost any finding would have contributed to the overall knowledge of the field. That stated, the research of this dissertation came across several findings that may prove highly valuable not only in understanding the lived experiences of asexual-identified individuals, but also how such variations in attractions may be further examined outside of the asexual population. As was heavily argued in Chapter 4, romantic attraction may vary substantially in allosexual populations but not be reported or acknowledged due to the uneven distribution of the knowledge of how attractions may vary (with asexual individuals being more likely to come into contact with knowledge on romantic attraction) and the possibility of variation in romantic attraction being perceived as normal in the general population. This may be further examined through the consideration of how sexually- and romantically-coded activities may blend in the general public because, as noted in Chapter 2 and 3, social expectations around private acts of sexual activity may be filtered through expectations of public demonstration or discussion of romantic activities.

Further, breaking down understandings of the experiences of participants around the topic of attraction and including considerations of orientation and contingent intensity, as suggested in the AOCIM, seems like a natural evolution of our current understandings. Having participants identify as “Straight, demisexual, alloromantic,” or with other multi-term definitions for sexual and/or romantic attraction is commonplace in asexuality research. As such, our definitions and

models should be reflective of that complexity as failing to do so may muddle our understandings of what factors are important in the experiences of our researched populations.

**Future Research**

Considerations of the future directions of research stemming from this research are relatively straightforward. Further consideration of romantic attraction in allosexual populations or mixed populations to compare across experiences would likely be quite fruitful in progressing the field further. As research on romantic attraction in such populations has not been done through the lens of differentiated attraction, any result would be useful. However, working with populations less likely to be informed on sexual attraction and romantic attraction-based terminology may require a degree of translation of the concepts. I provided an example of survey questions in Appendix A, but other options, such as mapping histories and visualizations of attractions would be exciting to see in future qualitative research.

Outside the general consideration of romantic attraction in non-asexual populations, an analysis on how sexual expectations manifest in a population would be insightful. An examination of how open people are with explicit conversation of private sexual acts, how often such activity is veiled in more public expectations of displays of romance, and what social rules seem to be in place regarding the acceptability of such conversations would prove highly useful in furthering our understandings of sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and how displays of such attraction are normalized in various populations.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has been more fruitful than expected. Upon setting out with this research into asexuality, the expectation was that variations between asexual, demisexual, and gray-asexual attractions would lead to similar scale of variations in experiences to various romantic attraction. However, the findings defied those expectations in an insightful way, reinforcing the importance of romantic attraction. This was happening just as research articles (e.g., Carvalho and Rodrigues 2022; Tessler and Winer 2023; Winer 2024) were being published which were also noting the increasing evidence on the importance of romantic attraction.

As such, in part because of the direction the study of asexuality has taken, the findings of this dissertation have become only more relevant with the current field of research. Its findings regarding the importance of romantic attraction, the tendency for displays of sexual and romantic attraction to mix in public, and the questioning of the valuation of romantic relationships over other forms of caring relationships add to the current field of research in highly valuable ways. Further, the AOCIM fills in gaps in the current theoretical understandings of attraction by separating orientation from contingent intensity. There is further a timeliness to this model as these gaps are apparent in asexuality research and the model can further ease research into considering romantic attractions across diverse sexual identities. As Chapters 2, 3, and 4 were intended to function as articles to be submitted for publication after the end of this dissertation, the findings, the timeliness of the findings, and the potential to fill gaps in the literature are each expected to increase the chance of publication for this research.

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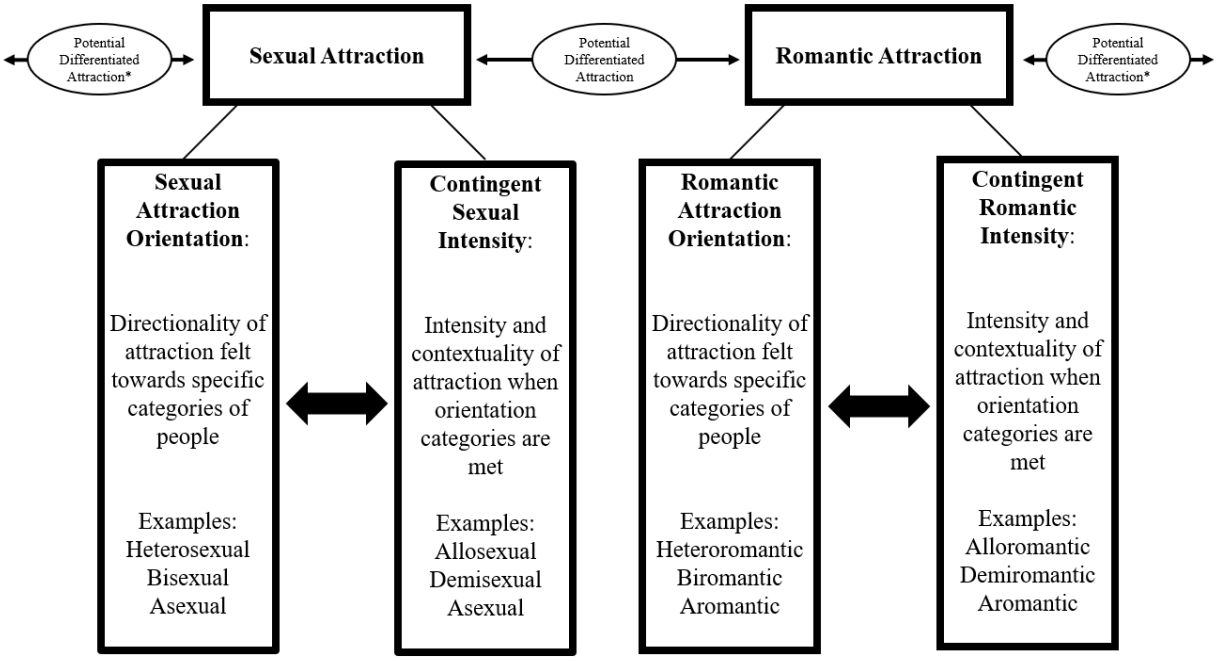
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Table 1. Participant Characteristics

| Pseudonym | Pronouns | Age | Race | Sex Assigned At Birth | Gender | Sexual Identification | Romantic Identification | Uncertainty in Identification |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BEATRICE | She/They | 41 | White | Female | Agender | Asexual | Aromantic | No |
| CAROLINE | She/Her | 39 | White | Female | Cisgender | Asexual/Queer* | Biromantic | No |
| DENISE | They/Them | 29 | White | Female | Agender | Demi-/Ace-spec* | Demi-/Gray-aro-spec* | Yes |
| FELICIA | She/Her | 27 | White | Female | Cisgender | Asexual/Queer* | Alloromantic/Queer* | Yes |
| FREDRICK | He/Him | 26 | White | Male | Cisgender | Asexual/Ace-spec* | Hetero/Alloromantic | Yes |
| GAIL | They/Them | 28 | White | Male | Nonbinary | Demisexual | Interest in non-men | Yes |
| GREGORY | He/Him | 32 | Black | Male | Cisgender | Asexual | Aromantic | No |
| HEIDI | She/Her | 29 | White | Female | Questioning | Asexual | Aromantic | No |
| IRIS | She/Her | 25 | White | Female | Agender Girl | Asexual | Aromantic | No |
| KATE | She/Her | 24 | White | Female | Nonbinary | Gray-asexual | Queer/Questioning | Yes |
| LESLIE | She/Her | 21 | White | Female | Cisgender | Asexual | Biromantic | No |
| JAIDEN | He/Him | 22 | Asian/Indian | Male | Cisgender | Demisexual | Demi-/Homoromantic | Yes |
| JAY | They/Them | 26 | White | Female | Nonbinary | Asexual/Ace-spec* | Aromantic | Yes |
| JUSTIN | He/Him | 29 | White/Hispanic | Male | Nonbinary | Asexual | Alloromantic | No |
| MARCOS | He/Him | 22 | White | Male | Cisgender | Asexual | Demi-/Panromantic* | Yes |
| NATHAN | He/Him | 39 | Black | Female | Genderqueer | Asexual/Ace-spec* | Aromantic/Aro-Spec* | Yes |
| PHEOBE | She/Her | 30 | White/Jewish | Female | Cisgender | Demisexual | Demiromantic | No |
| STEPHEN | He/Him | 31 | White | Male | Cisgender | Asexual | Aegoromantic/Aro-spec* | Yes |
| RAMONA | She/Her | 53 | White | Female | Nonbinary | Demisexual | Demiromantic | Yes |
| REBECCA | He/Him | 22 | White | Male | Female | Asexual | Biromantic | No |
| ROLAND | He/Him | 34 | White | Male | Cisgender | Asexual | Hetero/Panromantic* | No |

*Instances where participants adjusted the wording of their sexual and/or romantic identity between the survey and interview stages of the research. The table notes survey responses first.

Figure 1: The Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model




*Romantic Attraction and Sexual Attraction are shown in this model as being an example of potentially differentiated forms of attraction as they are the most commonly differentiated attractions noted in research. Examples of other forms of differentiated attractions that may exist with these are Aesthetic Attraction and Sensual Attraction.

**Index A: Term Definitions**

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Sexual Attraction**: | Feelings of sexual desire for another person |
| **Asexuality / Ace:** | A sexual identification defined the lack of experiencing sexual attraction. |
| **Demisexual / Demi:** | A sexual identification defined by the potential of experiencing sexual attraction with a person after an emotional bond has been established. |
| **Gray-asexual / Graysexual:** | A sexual identification defined by a low degree or infrequent occurrence of sexual attraction. |
| **Asexual-Spectrum / Ace-Spec**: | An umbrella term referring to the collection of sexual orientations and identifications that are associated with no, low, or infrequent sexual attraction. |
| **Allosexual / Allo:** | Having an orientation that is not asexual. Often used more generally to indicate sexualities not on the asexual-spectrum. |
| **Romantic Attraction**: | A type of differentiated attraction that can occur for some individuals. Romantic feelings are noted as differentiated from other types of attraction such as sexual attraction. |
| **Aromantic / Aro**: | A romantic identification defined by a lack of experiencing romantic attraction. |
| **Demiromantic**: | A romantic identification defined by the potential of experiencing romantic attraction with a person after an emotional bond has been established. |
| **Gray-romantic**: | A romantic identification defined by a low degree or infrequent occurrence of romantic attraction. |
| **Cupioromantic**: | A romantic identification which describes a person who wants a romantic relationship, but does not feel romantic attraction. |
| **Aegoromantic**: | A romantic identification which describes the individual having an affinity for the concept of romance, but not wishing to be a participant in romantic activity. |
| **Aromantic-Spectrum /Aro-Spec:** | An umbrella term referring to the collection of romantic / orientations and identifications that are associated with no, low, or infrequent romantic attraction. |
| **Alloromantic:** | Having a romantic orientation or identification that is not aromantic. Often used more generally to indicate identities not on the aromantic spectrum. |

**Aesthetic Attraction**: A type of differentiated attraction that can occur for some individuals. Notes an attraction towards the appearance of an individual that is differentiated from other attractions, such as romantic or sexual attraction.

**Sensual Attraction**: A type of differentiated attraction that can occur for some individuals. Notes a desire to have physical contact with a person, such as kissing, hugging, or cuddling, that is differentiated from other attractions, such as romantic or sexual attraction.

Appendix A: Survey Items for the *Attraction Orientation and Contingent Intensity Model*

Q1a. How do you identify in regard to your ***sexual*** orientation? (Specifically focusing on sex and sexual activity, please ignore other romantic activities)
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐Straight / Heterosexual
- ☐Gay
- ☐Lesbian
- ☐Bisexual
- ☐Pansexual
- ☐Asexual
- ☐Queer Sexuality
- ☐Prefer not to state
- ☐Other (please specify)

Other (if selected): _____

Q1b. On a scale of one to seven, which of the following do you believe best describes your level of ***sexual interest*** for the group(s) you selected above?

| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Minimally / Not Interested in Sex* | | | *Moderate Interest in Sex* | | | *Highly Interested in Sex* |

Q2a. How do you identify in regard to your ***romantic*** orientation? (Specifically focusing on romantic activity, please ignore sex or sexual activities)
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐Straight / Heteroromantic
- ☐Gay / Homoromantic
- ☐Lesbian / Homoromantic
- ☐Biromantic
- ☐Panromantic
- ☐Aromantic
- ☐Queer Romantic Orientation
- ☐Prefer not to state
- ☐Other (please specify)

Other (if selected): _____

Q2b. On a scale of one to seven, which of the following do you believe best describes your level of *romantic interest* for the group(s) you selected above?

| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Minimally / Not Interested in Romance* | | | *Moderately Interested in Romance* | | | *Highly Interested in Romance* |

Q3a. How do you identify in regard to your *aesthetic* orientation? (Specifically focusing on aesthetic or visual interests, please ignore romance, sex, or sexual activities)
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐Straight / Heteroaesthetic
- ☐Gay / Homoaesthetic
- ☐Lesbian / Homoaesthetic
- ☐Biaesthetic
- ☐Panaesthetic
- ☐A-aesthetic
- ☐Queer Aesthetic Orientation
- ☐Prefer not to state
- ☐Other (please specify)

Other (if selected): ☐

Q3b. On a scale of one to seven, which of the following do you believe best describes your level of *aesthetic interest* for the group(s) you selected above?

| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Minimally / Not Interested in Aesthetics* | | | *Moderately Interested in Aesthetics* | | | *Highly Interested in Aesthetics* |

Q4a. How do you identify in regard to your *sensual* orientation? (Specifically focusing on sensual interests such as cuddling, massage, etc., please ignore aesthetic or romance activities)
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐Straight / Heterosensual
- ☐Gay / Homosensual
- ☐Lesbian / Homosensual
- ☐Bisensual
- ☐Pansensual
- ☐Asensual
- ☐Queer Sensual Orientation
- ☐Prefer not to state
- ☐Other (please specify)

Other (if selected): ☐

Q4b. On a scale of one to seven, which of the following do you believe best describes your level of *sensual interest* for the group(s) you selected above?

| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Minimally / Not Interested in Sensuality* | | | *Moderately Interested in Sensuality* | | | *Highly Interested in Sensuality* |

Q5. In terms of your overall interests, please order the following by how much interest you feel for each category. If any are equal, please group them into the same row:

Sex / Interest Based on Sex
Romance / Interest Based on Romance
Aesthetics / Interest Based on Visual Appearance
Sensuality / Interest Based on Touch

Q6. On a scale of one to seven, indicate what best describes your level of *sexual interest* for each of the genders:

| *Sexual Interest in:* | *Minimal / None* | | | Moderate | | | High |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | | | | | | | |
| Women | | | | | | | |
| Trans Men | | | | | | | |
| Trans Women | | | | | | | |
| Non-binary people | | | | | | | |
| Queer people | | | | | | | |
| Other gender: | | | | | | | |

If other, please specify: _____

Q7. On a scale of one to seven, indicate what best describes your level of *romantic interest* for each of the genders:

| Romantic Interest in: | *Minimal / None* | | | Moderate | | | High |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | | | | | | | |
| Women | | | | | | | |
| Trans Men | | | | | | | |
| Trans Women | | | | | | | |
| Non-binary people | | | | | | | |
| Queer people | | | | | | | |
| Other gender: | | | | | | | |

If other, please specify:

Q8. On a scale of one to seven, indicate what best describes your level of *aesthetic interest* for each of the genders:

| Aesthetic Interest in: | *Minimal / None* | | | Moderate | | | High |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | | | | | | | |
| Women | | | | | | | |
| Trans Men | | | | | | | |
| Trans Women | | | | | | | |
| Non-binary people | | | | | | | |
| Queer people | | | | | | | |
| Other gender: | | | | | | | |

If other, please specify:

Q9. On a scale of one to seven, indicate what best describes your level of *sensual interest* for each of the genders:

| sensual Interest in: | *Minimal / None* | | | Moderate | | | High |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | | | | | | | |
| Women | | | | | | | |
| Trans Men | | | | | | | |
| Trans Women | | | | | | | |
| Non-binary people | | | | | | | |
| Queer people | | | | | | | |
| Other gender: | | | | | | | |

If other, please specify:

Q10: Do you feel that any of the following terms describe your sexual interests? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐Graysexual (Low or infrequent feelings of interest towards sex)
- ☐Demisexual (Only feel sexual interest after developing an emotional bond)
- ☐Sapiosexual (Feeling sexual interest towards intelligence)
- ☐Cupiosexual (Does not feel interest in sex, but still enjoys sexual relationships)
- ☐Aegosexual (Enjoys the idea of sexual relationships, but does not want one)
- ☐None of these apply
- ☐Other (please specify):

Q11: Please select any of the following that you feel describes your romantic interests:

- ☐Grayromantic (Low or infrequent feelings of interest in romance)
- ☐Demiromantic (Only feel interest in romance after developing an emotional bond)
- ☐Sapioromantic (Feeling romantic interest towards intelligence)
- ☐Cupioromantic (Does not feel interest in romance, but still enjoys romantic relationships)
- ☐Aegoromantic (Enjoys the idea of romantic relationships, but does not want one)
- ☐None of these apply:
- ☐Other (please specify):

Q12: Please select any of the following that you feel describes your aesthetic interests:

- ☐Grayaesthetic (Low or infrequent feelings of interest in appearance)
- ☐Demiaesthetic (Only feels aesthetic interest after developing an emotional bond)
- ☐None of these apply
- ☐Other (please specify): ☐

Q13: Please select any of the following that you feel describes your sensual interests:

- ☐Graysensual (Low or infrequent feelings of interest in touch)
- ☐Demisensual (Only feels interest in touch after developing an emotional bond)
- ☐None of these apply
- ☐Other (please specify): ☐

**Appendix B: Recruitment Materials**

Twitter Recruitment Message:

SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS for research into social experiences among asexual individuals.
Participants must be 18 or older and should be on the asexual spectrum
If interested, please use the link below for more information: https://bit.ly/3KTADu8

Recruitment Message for Discord Forum:

Seeking participants for research into social experiences among asexual individuals.
Greetings everyone. I am Jessie Laljer, a PhD Candidate from the University of Oklahoma's Department of Sociology. I am currently researching how being asexual can affect social relationships and how expectations of society may interact with asexuality.
I am looking for varying sexual and romantic orientations that fall on the asexual spectrum.
Participants must be 18 or older.
There is an introductory survey and will be used to see if you are able and willing to participate in the interview portion of the research.
The full study would include an in-depth interview for those willing, but you can opt out at any time. The interviews will run around 1~2 hours, and those who are interviewed will be entered into a raffle for one of four $25 Amazon gift cards.
If interested, please use this link for more information and for the introductory survey: https://bit.ly/3KTADu8
If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at jessie.laljer (at) ou (dot) edu

**Appendix C: Interview Schedule**

[Brackets indicate notes for researcher on rough follow-up questions or what to look out for, they are not used to specify questions asked]

[Before recording starts, clarify that ZOOM connection is working well. Researcher needs to go through the Oral Consent. Give time to answer any questions, make sure the subject understands clearly, and confirm their consent for the interview and to be recorded.]

1. How would your describe your sexuality?
    a. [In this, researcher is primarily looking for asexual, demisexual, gray-asexual]

2. And to check, since sexuality and romantic interest can sometimes vary for individuals, what would you state to be your romantic preference?
    a. [Aromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic, etc.]

3. If I may ask, how did you come to discover your sexuality?
    a. [Keep notes on terms versus feelings of sexuality, ask follow-up questions if needed]

4. May I ask your gender identity?

5. With gender identity noted, may I ask what your sex assigned at birth was?

6. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?
    a. [this is meant to more let subjects relax, build rapport]

7. How did you come to discover your sexuality?
    a. [look at what means they used to discover it.]
    b. [Ask follow-up questions to figure out if it has changed over time]

c. [Keep an eye out for if they considered themselves a late bloomer, or that they would develop sexual feelings eventually. Ask if they considered it if it is not brought up in the recollection]
d. You noted you identified as X for your romantic interests earlier, how has that developed for you?
    i. [look at over time, relative to sexuality, etc.]
e. [During the above questions/followups, note how they view sex. If it is with disdain, disinterest, etc.]

8. How do your see your sexuality?
    a. Has this changed much over time?
        i. Ask their view of it in a positive/negative light,
        ii. when did they learn about it,
        iii. Do you think your expectations have been influenced or built on your experiences with others?
            1. [such as family, friends, online, etc.]
    b. How do you view your sexuality in relation to your other identities or facets of yourself?
        i. [if example is needed, give an example of I am a student, and a bit of a teacher, and a sibling, and non-binary. We have a lot of different identities, so how does theirs fit in? [Salience question]]

9. How do you see your romantic interests?
    a. [See how it differs from sexual interests]
    b. [see how they conflict, ask for examples if the opportunity arises]

10. Do you tend to associate or make friends with other asexual people?
    a. Do you bond with LGBT+ people?
    b. Have you ever been part of a LGBT+ related group, either online or in-person?
    c. How were your experiences? What are your thoughts on the topic?
        i. [keep an eye out for stereotypes, followup questions as needed]

    ii. [followup on social context if not given]
d. What are your thoughts on asexual groups, such as AVEN or in-person social groups for LGBT+ or asexual individuals?
    i. [Point of these questions is to figure out if they socialize or find connection with LGBT+ groups or asexual individuals. Alternatively, it is meant to see if they find value in knowing or associating with people on the grounds of shared sexuality or general groups.]
e. Which communities do you feel at home in?
f. Do you have non-LGBT or Asexual communities that you feel at home in?
    i. Would you mind comparing your experiences?

11. Have you been in romantic relationships?
    a. [If so] Could briefly describe your experiences with them
    b. How do you currently view such relationships for yourself?
        i. Has this changed over time?
        ii. Do you currently find these relationships important for yourself?
        iii. [Followup questions on if it caused them to feel lonely/isolated. If they've had problems with finding a partner or if they see finding a partner as important for them at all.]
        iv. [Note differences in what kinds of relationships they desire.]
        v. [Followup with questions based on sex-averse/sex-positive of the individual.]
    c. Have you felt pressured to be in a relationship in general? (From friends, family, romantic interest, etc.)
        i. [If so] was the pressure from any one source?
        ii. [if so] Could you describe?
    d. For long-term relationships, what kind do you find ideal for yourself?
        i. [Note romantic, platonic, what they see as important to them. What kind of sexual]

12. I'd like to move on to talking about your experiences with talking to others about your sexuality. Would you talk about any 'coming out' experiences you have had in relation to your asexuality?
    i. [Note: Who did they come out to first.]
    b. Who are they open with? [parents, siblings, friends, co-workers]
    c. [For each] What went through their mind as they thought to come out?
        i. [Why did they come out or make their sexuality more explicit?]
        ii. [Research makes note of if it was a decision of convenience, did they think about coming out a long time before they first came out?]
    d. Do you feel telling X about your sexuality has changed anything for your relationships, for positive or negative?
    e. Has being open about yourself to X changed your perception or feelings regarding your asexuality?
        i. [Looking for evidence of feelings of authenticity, potentially lowered/increased stress, seeing if there is evidence of if these events are important to the interviewee]

13. Generally, how do you feel your sexuality is received by those around you?
    a. [Depending on response ask if they feel supported, or if they can feel authentic, or if they feel isolated because of their sexuality]
    b. [This may very wildly depending on if the person has come out to many individuals, so this is probably the most open-ended question]

14. Have you experienced any kind of discrimination, alienated, or otherwise excluded from a group or activity due to your sexuality?
    a. Would you mind going into detail about the event(s)?
        i. [if appropriate, try to piece together which part that bothered them. Looking for what the source of discrimination was from, if it were lack of acceptance, discrimination, feeling left-out. Etc.]

15. Have you found yourself needing to hide your asexuality from others before?
    a. Could your describe the event(s)?
    b. How common is it that you avoid bringing up your sexuality?
        i. [ask how it made them feel]
        ii. [Looking for Concealable Stigmatized Identity-related stress]
        iii. [Also looking for when they feel it is important to hide or show sexuality]

16. Have you ever felt isolated from others because of your sexuality?
    a. Could your describe the event(s)/feelings?
    b. How common is this feeling for you?
        i. [Looking for if feelings of isolation may be a source of distress for asexual individuals]

17. To shift topic a little bit. We've had the COVID-19 pandemic and there were a lot of lockdowns over the last 2 years. How would consider your experiences during the lockdowns, particularly in relation to you being able to fulfill your own social needs.
    a. [Followup as needed with questions on romantic groups, if they considered their friendships as the primary and good support, family, etc.]

18. Alright, that's about all I have for my planned questions. Do you have anything you would like to note before we wrap up?

Great, since we're wrapping up. I'm going go ahead and end the recording here.

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

**Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects**

**Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01**

**Date:** June 23, 2022 **IRB#:** 14679

**Principal Investigator:** David "Jessie" Bradley Laljer

**Approval Date: 6/23/2022**

**Exempt Category: 2**

**Study Title:** Social Connection and Saliency Experiences among Asexual Individuals

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board