

It's not just about sex: Asexual identity and intimate relationship practices

Danielle Maxwell

PhD

University of York

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## Abstract

Queer and feminist scholars frequently claim that non-heteronormative sexualities, like asexuality, challenge heteronormative practices within intimate relationships. They argue that these sexualities lead to the emergence of new intimate practice and have the potential to revolutionise what is understood as the sexual “public story”—one in which a sexual assumption is repeatedly performed and an absence is culturally denied, sometimes to the point of pathologisation (Carrigan, 2011; Przybylo, 2011; Jamieson, 1998). A more recent analysis of asexuality suggests that there is very little evidence of specific asexual practices and that many asexuals are in fact not challenging heteronormative practices (see Dawson et al., 2016). Neither of these contradicting arguments fully details the nuances of how asexuality operates within intimate relationships, straddling both of these positions in practice. This thesis investigates the complexity of an asexual identity to capture the way it sometimes does and does not engage with and/or challenge heteronormativity within intimate relationships. Drawing on 68 online surveys and 29 online interviews, I thematically analysed participants’ stories to (1) understand how asexuality functions as a meaningful label, including the adoption of an asexual identity and (2) investigate patterns of intimate practices—partner selection, relationship types and forms of intimacy—and their connection to heteronormativity, an asexual identity or both. I demonstrate the presence of asexual-specific preferences, and how these preferences are often compromised for largely heteronormative practices. However, among asexual intimate practices I found a potential for the creation of more varied understandings that, while not fully challenging heteronormativity, offer more complex intimate relationship practices and understanding(s).

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Table of Contents .....	3
Acknowledgements .....	5
Chapter 1: Introduction to asexuality .....	7
1.2 Conceptualisation of asexuality: pre-2000s .....	9
1.3 Conceptualisations of asexuality: 2000 - 2016 .....	10
1.4 The development of online asexual communities .....	14
1.5 Research on asexuality from Bogaert to present.....	21
1.5.1 “Asexuality” definition agreement .....	22
1.5.2 Emerging themes in asexual research .....	24
1.6 Heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and the public story .....	29
1.7 Intimacy and the intimate relationship .....	31
1.8 Conclusion .....	41
Chapter 2: Me, myself and my methodology.....	43
2.2 Typing out new research fields .....	46
2.3 Sample and sampling strategies .....	57
2.4 Ethical considerations: Under-represented populations, security and costs .....	62
2.5 Further research challenges.....	68
2.6 Playing with words: Thematic analysis and bridging theories .....	74
2.7 Conclusion .....	78
Chapter 3: Identifying and communicating asexuality .....	80
3.2 Calling out the “gap” between Goffman’s “stages” .....	86
3.2.1 Just another actor in the heteronormative public story.....	88
3.2.2 Narratives of difference and “brokenness” as an indication of identity .....	93
3.3 Identification and a shift in sexual performance .....	96
3.4 Changes in interactions as a marker of a shift in identity .....	102
3.5 Let’s talk about the elephant in the room.....	107
3.6 Conclusion .....	110
Chapter 4: Finding the unicorn: identity and asexuals’ partner selection practices.....	113

4.2 Who is the “unicorn”? .....	117
4.2.1 Gender and sex preferences .....	118
4.2.2 Partner’s sexual orientation.....	123
4.2.3 Aesthetic views and ideals .....	127
4.2.4 Personality traits and interests .....	131
4.3 Practices for recognising and locating partners .....	137
4.3.1 Pragmatic and/or intentional relationship formation .....	137
4.3.2 Long-term friendships.....	142
4.3.3 Online networks.....	145
4.4 Conclusion: Reframing the same old question.....	153
Chapter 5: Transgressing[?] heteronormativity: Asexual intimate relationships and heteronormativity .....	156
5.2 Changing the name of the game: Types of intimate relationships.....	159
5.3 Heteronormative practices in asexual intimate relationships.....	165
5.4 Subversions and transgressions: Passing or revolutionising? .....	177
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	203
Appendices .....	215
Agreement to Participate in It’s not just about sex: Asexual identity and intimate relationship practices.....	215
Research Questions – Survey and Interview.....	217
Bibliography.....	219

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to asexuality

### *1.1 Self-identification as a research starting point*

“Why are you dating him? He wouldn’t make a good father.”

She laughed at my question. “I would never marry him!”

“Then why are you two dating?”

“I like him. Just because I like him, doesn’t mean I have to marry him.”

“But what, then, is the point of being in the relationship?”

This exchange occurred between a friend and me when we were twelve. Starting at an early age—precisely at what point, I cannot say—I struggled to understand sexuality and intimate relationships. I saw no purpose nor experienced any interest in the same type of physical, usually sexual, intimacy I noticed my peers engaging in. I struggled to understand aesthetic tastes and [sexual] attractions. Through exploration and masturbation, I knew my body could be aroused and reach orgasm; I knew I enjoyed the physiological sensations. My first relationship occurred in high school by which point I had learned how to adapt myself to appreciate the features valued in a partner in my culture: male, tall, muscular—something that resembled the “American football quarterback” cliché. I convinced myself that because this young man possessed those qualities seen as valuable, the rational thing to do would be to date him. The relationship lasted approximately three weeks.

Between that relationship and my next, I discovered asexuality. I refer to “discovered” in the sense that I had always, or at least for a long time, experienced what I came to know as “asexuality”, but I never had the language to define or identify that point of difference. Then a friend told me about asexuality, and I joined the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN; [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). On AVEN, I realised that my experiences were not solitary, unique views, but shared by many people. As I spent more time on AVEN, I found the commonplace narrative—of a person lacking sexual attraction and finding themselves struggling (or forced) to find relationships with those who would respect those boundaries—was more complex than I initially perceived, with a vast new language that detailed layers of variability regarding types of behaviours, forms of attraction, purpose for an intimate relationship, etc.

It was this language that enabled me to try again at having intimate relationships. It gave me the ability to explain to others what it felt like not to seek a partner from a position of sexual attraction. It allowed me to express the nuance I saw in relationships,

and it helped me articulate my sexual motivations. Prior to my exposure to AVEN, sexual discourse had only provided me with a state of *wanting* or *unwanting* in regards to sexual practices. I, however, located myself in a framework of ambivalence, which—while not the position of all asexuals—complicated the sexual discourse surrounding me. AVEN equipped me with the means to relay to my partner the complexity of my sexuality so that together we could properly communicate our desires, apprehensions, indifference, pleasures and frustrations.

Upon having sex, people thought it meant I was no longer an asexual, and I found myself re-entering a phase of my life all over again: a second phase of coming out where I had to re-legitimise my identity as an asexual, where I had to locate traditionally sexual practices in an asexual discourse. But such a discourse was not available. What did it mean to be an asexual participating in heteronormative practices? What did it mean to masturbate without finding it a sexual act? What did it mean to be indifferent about who I had sex with, but sometimes enjoy the act of sex? What did it mean to be an asexual in an intimate relationship, and why does that jeopardise my identification as an asexual?

Now, after having negotiated a four year intimate relationship, I seek to explore more fully the dimensions of intimate asexual relationships to illustrate the complexity of asexuality as it relates to intimacy, to address a broader understanding of intimate relationships as a whole and to interrogate heteronormative practices as they relate to [a]sexuality. Research on asexuality, though briefly referred to in the 1960s, did not really begin until Anthony Bogaert's work (2004), three years after the formation of online communities for asexuality such as AVEN. It is likely that the increased access of the internet, the emergence of these online communities and the subsequent media attention they generated, stimulated this field for research. Unfortunately, this sharp influx of research has largely lacked consistency in terms of the definitions of asexuality used, a lack of awareness of the complexity of practices and desire and often erred associations with other subsets of populations (e.g. disabled, mentally ill) throughout the research's analysis. There is also a lack of research around asexuals in relationships, particularly in relation to intimacy and conceptualising an asexual sexuality.

I attempt to fill this gap in research on asexuals' intimate relationships. Drawing on online surveying and interviewing, I explore how asexuals construct intimate relationships. Specifically, I seek to explain what being an asexual means to individuals and how that identity operates within intimate relationships. I analyse the ways asexuals come to understand and communicate their asexual identity within an intimate



relationship; the types of partners and intimacy asexuals prefer; and the types of intimate relationships asexuals participate in, including the practices, negotiations and motivations related to each. I locate each of these areas within the scope of heteronormativity to offer an analysis of what asexuality introduces and/or challenges to our current expected practice(s).

Using my analysis, I then theorise that a new model is needed for examining intimate relationships. I rely on arguments encompassing notions of pleasure to develop what such a model may look like, drawing on my previous analysis. I further theorise that such a model would not only yield a discourse for asexuals seeking to explain and make sense of their sexuality/sexualities, but would provide a new way for imagining intimacy and the intimate relationship irrelevant of one's sexual orientation.

### 1.2 Conceptualisation of asexuality: pre-2000s

Before Bogaert (2004), the term “asexuality” was rarely referred to in academic research. Early work, such as Alfred Kinsey and Michael Storms, briefly mentioned the term, but neither fully defined the concept. Two cited models developed out of Kinsey's research (group X; 1948, 1953) and Michael Storms' work (1979, 1980). Kinsey's work (1948, 1953) attempts to map individuals along a sexual scale of 0 (homosexual) to 6 (heterosexual). Kinsey used “category X” to refer to asexuals (also referred to as non-sexuals). Storms (1980, p. 278) adjusted Kinsey's model. Storms agreed with Kinsey that “sexual orientation arises solely from an individual's acquired erotic responsiveness to stimuli”, but he found Kinsey's model of sexual orientation inadequate and modified it (1980). Storms (1980, p. 279) developed “a two-

dimensional map of erotic orientation [which] produces four sexual orientation categories: asexual, heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual”. So, for instance, a homosexual is classified as someone with low hetero-eroticism, but high homo-eroticism. An asexual is someone who experiences low hetero-eroticism and low homo-eroticism (Storms, 1980, p. 278; see Figure 1).

Storms work, although only a loose definition of asexuality, located asexuality within his framework of sexual orientation rather than as an outlying anomaly as it was in Kinsey's work. Neither Storms nor Kinsey interrogate asexuality, though; they merely acknowledge that it exists. They also incorrectly

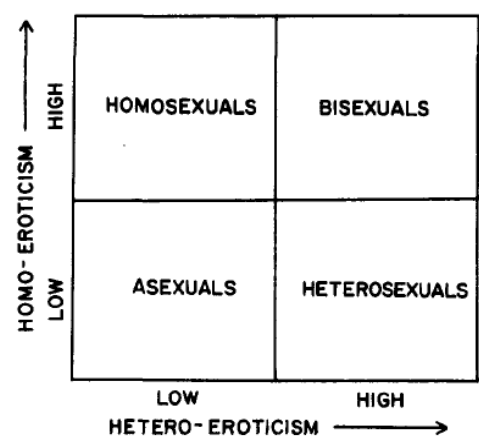


Figure 1: Storms' Model of Sexual Orientation (Storms, 1980)

associate one's sexual orientation as a reflection of one's response to stimuli. The notion that one's orientation is in some way "acquired" is further problematic as it contradicts the stability with which my participants discussed their own sexual orientation: as something that has been permanent [their entire life] and not "acquired". Ela Przybylo (2012, p. 227) argues that these researchers "took for granted that a category such as 'asexuality' must exist", but then produced work that can be "characterized by a disinterest in exploring its definitions, parameters, and implications". Given the historical context of their research—during the growth of sexual politics and sexual openness—the lack of attention on asexuality is not that unexpected. Both, however, did lay the groundwork for models and spectra of sexualities/sexual orientations, and Storms provided a modified model that provided a useful starting point for the inclusion of asexuality in sexual discourse.

### *1.3 Conceptualisations of asexuality: 2000 - 2016*

Prior and during the early 2000s, discussions around a lack of sexual desire and/or interest were generally grouped into psychological discourses in the form of two psychological disorders: sexual aversion disorder and hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD). The DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) defines hypoactive sexual desire disorder as "a deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity, which causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty". At this time, some asexuals were in therapy for these disorders.<sup>1</sup> Around the mid-2000s researchers (Bogaert, 2006; Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Van Houdenhove et al., 2013) began to investigate the tendency to group asexuality into psychological discourse and highlight how part of the definition in the DSM requires "marked distress and interpersonal difficulty", which have not been found to be common features of asexuality (Bogaert, 2006; Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Van Houdenhove et al., 2013). Bogaert (2006) claims that some asexuals experience instances of sexual desire, arousal and/or enjoy participating in conventionally sexual behaviours, which contradicts some of the definition of HSDD. His analysis, though falling slightly short, also highlights how some researchers do not fully engage what is meant by an absence of sexual desire (i.e. sometimes "sexual desire" is equated to "sexual attraction"). Van Houdenhove et al. (2013, p. 10), for example, makes an argument in relation to sexual desire equating to sexual attraction, claiming that

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<sup>1</sup> Although not discussed among my participants, the therapies are discussed among some members on AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)).

“[p]ersons with HSDD [...] can experience sexual attraction, but they do not feel the desire to act upon this”, which is contrary to the experiences of an asexual: a lack of sexual attraction and sometimes an interest to participate in sexual practices. Despite these points of differences raised by researchers, the culture of pathologising asexuality continued until 2013 and made it difficult for people who viewed themselves as asexual and others reluctant to accept an asexual sexual orientation.

The DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), however, recognises asexuals as a separate sexual orientation, explicitly excluding self-identified asexuals in the definition. Although the DSM-V model has shifted the definition of HSDD away from potentially including asexuals, the psychological framework can still be problematic for conceptualising asexuality. “Disorders” suggest that something is outside the realm of what is considered as “normal” behaviour. This first articulates sexual interests as a normal state of being and then implicitly argues a certain “level of sexual desire [to be] normative” (Prause and Graham, 2007, pp. 341-342). So not only does one need to experience sexual desire to be normal, but an individual must experience it to a particular degree. Despite contemporary research highlighting the requirement of “marked distress” and the change in the definition (e.g. Prause and Graham, 2007), the invisibility of asexuality combined with the high sexualisation of popular culture maintain heteronormative views on sexuality and continue to push a pathologisation and/or a lack of normalisation of being asexual.

While some self-identifying asexuals are being misidentified as sexuals or disordered, other populations, “such as disabled and/or sick persons” and the elderly (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279), are misidentified as asexual. This is a position that defines asexuality through behaviour (i.e. “asexuality” as a lack of participation in sexual behaviours) and is built around the notion that an individual is in some way incapable or assumingly disinterested in sexual behaviours and/or lacks sexual desire (Van Houdenhove et al., 2013). For example, among people with disabilities Maureen Milligan and Aldred Neufeldt (2001, p. 92, p. 91) found that “although their sexual function is typically intact, individuals with intellectual disabilities and/or psychiatric disorders are thought to have limited social judgment, and therefore, lack the capacity to engage in responsible sexual relationships”, and “therefore [society perceives these individuals as] unsuitable as romantic partners”. They are concurrently labelled as “asexual” because of their perceived lack of participation in sexual behaviours, which also perpetuates a view of asexuality as a category of sexual practices rather than a sexual orientation.

In response to this misidentification, there has been an extensive campaign for sexual recognition developed partly out of sex-positive work and feminist discourse, which creates a backlash against asexuality and, in particular, those members of these populations who identify as asexual. Eunjung Kim (2011, p. 479) argues that “claims for the sexual rights of desexualized minority groups mistakenly target asexuality and endorse a universal and persistent presence of sexual desire”. One participant of Kim’s study was taught “to perform being sexual” as “an extension of having been taught to perform being social” in order “to minimize her autism-related differences” (Kim, 2011, p. 479). The participant was expected to perform sexually as part of her work to appear “normal”, but this was in contradiction to her asexual sexual orientation. In response to the expectations to be sexual, Kim’s participant is part of a group working to destabilize the presumption that “being sexual is compulsory as a prerequisite for being normal” (Kim, 2011, p. 485). This work is still ongoing, but the work to denaturalize sexuality might present an opportunity to destabilize what is perceived as normal.

The misidentification of certain populations as asexual and the discourse which encompasses sexuality as a central part of normal human [inter]action challenges two assumptions of sexual essentialism, the view that sexual desire is a “natural and essential characteristic” innate to people (Scherrer, 2008, p. 629). The first assumption is that if sexual desire<sup>2</sup> is something natural, then asexuality is either something unnatural or is something that can be located within our biological processes. The second assumption is that because current asexual discourse and narratives of asexual activism construct asexuality as a permanent state of being (presented as such to validate and/or legitimise asexuality), asexuality is arguably something innate.

Przybylo (2012, p. 230) claims that there are three key themes in sex-surveying research pertaining to asexuality, which I argue has assisted in the construction of the first assumption: (1) “there is a veritable binding of (a)sexuality to the body”; (2) “asexuality [as] a site of struggle over understandings of so-called orientation and pathology, legitimacy and disorder”; and (3) “in many cases asexuality becomes an occasion for shoring up naturalizations of sexual difference”. Among the most common social assumptions is “that all humans possess sexual desire” (Cole, 1993; Scherrer, 2008, p. 621), which relates to Przybylo’s first theme. Biological investigations to assert social constructions as grounded in the body are nothing new, particularly for marginalized sexualities (see Yule, 2011). Bogaert (2004, p. 280), for example, points to

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<sup>2</sup> Again, “sexual desire” is used interchangeably to refer to “sexual attraction” and “a desire to participate in sexual behaviours”.

research on how certain brain structures have been “hypothesized to underlie sexual orientation”. Lisa Diamond (2004) explores asexuality’s bodily presentations more intricately, focusing on different love models related to structures in the brain. Diamond’s work, however, makes a distinction between the biological operation of sexual desire and romantic love. Diamond (2004, p. 116) argues that although “sexual desire and romantic love are often experienced in concert, they are fundamentally distinct subjective experiences with distinct neurobiological substrates”. If love and desire operate from two different neurobiological substrates, then one could argue that there is the potential for asexuality to be biologically plausible (and potentially occurring in a causal relationship), and it might be possible to argue that one’s desire for only romantic relationships and not sexual ones is biologically based or genetically predisposed. It also potentially explains situations where individuals experience a reduced sexual libido or a shift in sexual orientation, such as a decrease in sexual desire when taking certain medication, but no change in their romantic interests. Further, asexuality has been associated with attachment models and adult pair bonding theories. Diamond (2004, p. 117) contends that “adult pair bonding may be an exaptation—a system that originally evolved for one reason, but comes to serve another”. Initially, it served as a function of child-rearing, but had been adapted to adult pairing and presents itself in the form of romantic love/attraction. This is of course extremely problematic, and the model fails to explore the complexity of sexual participation, strong desires for sexual practices but not with a particular person, and fails to offer a space for non-romantic asexuals.

The second assumption used to assert sexual essentialism is a misinterpretation of asexual narratives. In her work on asexual narratives, Janet Sundrud (2011, p.22) examines a pattern where “asexuals often present their identity as something stable and eternally fixed”. She claims that through “establishing an essentialist identity, asexuals seek to legitimize their asexual orientation”. Przybylo (2011, p. 445) argues that “essentialism is enacted not only by normative sexualities against marginal ones, but it is rearticulated and recirculated throughout all sectors of sexusociety, so that fringe identities fighting for their survival also replay its logic”. The problem arises when these narratives are taken up by researchers and misconstrued to assert biological groundings for sexual identities and/or essential selves. Narratives of having “always felt this way” become misconstrued as meaning “and will always be this way”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the prevalence of a sense of essentialist selves among my participants, I chose to instead allow this into the work, but resisted the assumption that this had to then point to something biological.

In summary, these studies attempt to locate a predisposition/genetic causation of sexuality on the premise that there *must* be one. But whether sexual orientation is biologically originated is not all that relevant to some asexuals, according to the narratives on AVEN and reported in research (e.g. Sundrud, 2011). At best, it provides a sense of legitimization to some asexuals (assuming that need does not simply come from the high value we place on science as a point of legitimacy). There is very little evidence that suggests or has been articulated by asexuals to stipulate that being “born this way” matters to an individual’s understanding of him/herself as an asexual. This is primarily because many asexuals view “asexuality” more as their identity rather than their sexual orientation (Hinderliter, 2009b; Hinderliter, 2009c; Jay, 2003). Furthermore, Andrew Hinderliter (2009b, p. 7) claims that “asexual identity and asexual orientation do not completely coincide”, which means that for those who lack an asexual *orientation*, biological grounds and essentialist arguments on sexual orientation have very little implications for their self-identification.

#### *1.4 The development of online asexual communities*

In 1997, Zoe O’Reilly wrote a newspaper article declaring she was “out and proud to be asexual”. She explained that “as far as the rest of the world is concerned, asexual organisms with more than one cell don’t exist”. She spoke of a collective “we”, seeking “a colored ribbon, a national holiday, coupons for fast food. We want the world to know that we are out there”. Her article, “My life as an amoeba”, became the inspiration for the development of online communities such as AVEN, an asexual community on LiveJournal, and the Yahoo group Haven for the Human Amoeba (HHA; Jay, 2003; Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 2). David Jay’s work on AVEN and the media that encompassed him (e.g. *20/20*, *The View*, *The Huffington Post*) drew large amounts of attention toward AVEN and helped jumpstart these new communities for asexuals. It was on both HHA and AVEN, though, that what self-identified asexuals came to understand as “asexuality” developed.<sup>4</sup>

The three primary asexual online communities developed in the early 2000s. The Yahoo group “Haven for the Human Amoeba” was formed in 2000, but “there was no conversation until Feb 2001 when the founder was curious who the other people who had joined (but not said anything) were” (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 2). A community for

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than suggesting these communities brought together people who were asexual, I intentionally point to the way what is understood as “asexual” is influenced—if not altogether designed—by these communities.

asexuals formed on LiveJournal in April 2002 (<http://asexuality.livejournal.com>). The creator explained that the group was formed “because [of] a gap which needed filling” (Nat, 2002). The central goal of the LiveJournal community was to provide “a good place for celibate people to discuss the difficulty of living in a society which continually pushes sexual images into our faces”, but free of posts that target the “sexual activities of others” (Nat, 2002). At the initial formation of the LiveJournal group, “celibacy” was the best way asexuals were able to articulate their desires or lack thereof. Then, in June 2002, David Jay, influenced by O’Reilly’s piece and adopting the term asexual from it, formed AVEN, creating a different type of online space with greater functionality than HHA and more interactive than LiveJournal (Jay, 2003). Jay believed that “experiences that are considered shameful or awkward to discuss are often ‘closeted’ until individuals are comfortable and articulate enough to include them in public discourse” (Jay, 2003, p. 1). Jay (2003) argues that the internet—and by consequence, AVEN—provides the resources necessary to create safe spaces for identity exploration. In that exploration, individuals are then able to come together to form cohesive identities and communities and build “a new type of social movement: one directed not externally at society or the state but internally at understanding and articulating its own collective identity; a global network of closets, connected by computers, slowly working themselves open” (2003, p. 2). Jay strove to generate an open conversation around asexuality, which quickly developed into an exchange of experiences, stories, feelings, and new language for thinking about and discussing asexuality. This early language included terms such as “nonsexuality, antisexuality, and asexuality”, and these discussions “took place on boards mostly unrelated to asexuality and strongly affirmed the notion of asexual identity” (Jay, 2003, p. 3). These three communities frequently linked material from one to the other and grew in popularity as additional websites and media highlighted their online existence. This was further assisted through increased access to the internet.

Within each of these communities, there were variable understandings of what it meant to be asexual. Jay (2003, p. 4) argues that in asexuals’ attempt “to articulate their individual experiences a complicated set of issues emerged: an inability to articulate nonsexual desires, annoyance with socially ubiquitous notions of fulfilment through sexuality and frustration at the lack of information publicly available about sexuality”. So, although there was some early terminology (celibacy, nonsexuality, etc.) and communities to speak within, asexuals were greatly limited in their discussion of their experiences, sensations, desires and needs because of a lack of language and operational definitions. The primary struggle came out of defining “asexuality”. In HHA, the

founder identified asexuality as “being not sexual—with reference to people, this means not being sexually attracted to men or women” (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 2). Continued conversation in the group added to the asexual discourse, discussing “the concept of undirected sex-drive”, following noted variations in behaviour among HHA group members, particularly around participation in the act of masturbation (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 3).

The creator of LiveJournal self-identified as asexual, stating, “I have no sex drive worth speaking of. My attractions to people are purely emotional or aesthetic” (Nat, 2002). Nat (2002) also, as previously mentioned, formed the group to provide a space for celibate people to discuss their (lack thereof) sexuality. This early definition of asexuality functions in a few different ways: (1) asexuality is the absence of a “sex drive”, although it is unclear if this refers to what is now understood as “sexual attraction” or “libido”; (2) there are different types of attraction and asexuals can experience non-sexual forms of attraction; and (3) asexuality relates to the absence of sexual behaviour.

Unlike LiveJournal and HHA, AVEN was able to construct operational definitions through a Collective Identity Model. AVEN defined asexuality through an identity rather than an orientation. Jay (2003, p. 3) argues that “to build a collective identity asexuals must collectively understand and identify around some common experience (not merely a lack of one)”. Such a model is useful because “[n]o single definition encompasses all asexual people, so the common theme is that asexuals are people who call themselves asexual because they disidentify with sexuality—i.e. they prefer not to have sex, and this affects how they go about forming relations” (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 4). The website AVEN has a section of static content and another of dynamic forums (and presently, text-based chat). The “static content provides a model for an asexual collective identity, a way for new arrivals at the site to understand what asexuality means and to see if it fits with their experience [...providing] the community with a cohesive set of understandings on which to build its collective identity” (Jay, 2003, p.6). One of the first things individuals see on the static content is a definition of asexuality as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). The static content also provides an easy means to get basic information on asexuality that developed out of the early conversations encompassing this definition. These early conversations occurred on the dynamic portion of the website. The community recognised a need both for a definition for oneself and a definition for visibility purposes, an important dimension to one’s experience as an



asexual and one's ability to communicate that identification (Jay, 2003). Varying experiences of sexual behaviour, intimate relationships, different levels of libido and confusion around different types of attraction complicated attempts to find a more suitable definition than the one given in the static content ("a person who does not experience sexual attraction"). These definitions include: (1) "a person who does not have a sex drive and has never had one, and hence does not experience sexual urges or desire (and in particular, does not masturbate)" (Hinderliter, 2009b, 3); (2) a person who has "little or no sex-drive" (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 6); (3) a person who has little or no sexual attraction; (4) a person who self-identifies as asexual (Hinderliter, 2009b, p. 6); and (5) a person who has no desire to act on their sexual attraction (Scherrer, 2008). Community members rejected different aspects of these definitions because they did not account for the variability in practices, behaviours and experience, and thus, "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" has remained as the agreed upon definition. Hinderliter (2009a, p. 4) asserts that "[i]n this context, [of a community built around collective identity formation] the definition 'a person who does not experience sexual attraction' was intended to enable people to articulate the purpose of asexual visibility rather than as the one that the community was based on", while within the community itself, self-identification as an asexual is what defined members.

The AVEN forums are divided up into different categories, but most members start by posting in the "Welcome Forum". This area of the forums provides newcomers and members alike the opportunity to share their experiences as well as find validation through the comfort of finding "others like me" (Jay, 2003, p. 7), which is a critical component of collective identity formation. Hinderliter (2009b, p. 8) argues that although individuals often identify with the main definition in the static content, an "even bigger reason [they identify as asexual] is that as they read about the experiences of people identifying as asexual, they find something that fits their experiences, something they can identify with after such a long time of being bombarded with messages about sexuality that did not fit with their own feelings and no messages recognizing that there are people like themselves". What is understood as "asexual" is then intricately tied to what is articulated by the asexual community.

This collective identity, then, is rather problematic from a researcher's perspective. On the one hand, many asexuals report asexuality as the lack of sexual attraction (Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2009; Scherrer, 2008; Prause & Graham, 2007), but the way many experience and/or participate asexually can be quite different from this base definition. For example, Scherrer (2008) discusses an individual who

despite feeling sexual attraction, had no desire to act upon those feelings, and in consequence, identifies as an asexual. This directly violates the primary definition, yet the community accepts this identification—the only thing that really unifies the group is a “sense of being ‘not sexual’ or a disidentification with sexuality” (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 8). However, this means that the experiential understanding of asexuality and the community definition of asexuality is one of self-identification, which is not a definition researchers can truly operationalize in their work. It also means that the definition is intricately tied to the cultural community of asexuality and is temporally located within the fluctuating concerns and narratives of that community.

#### *1.4.1 The success of AVEN and an overview of its composition*

Although HHA and the asexuality community on LiveJournal still exist and are accessible, AVEN has quickly become the main site of reference for information on asexuality and research. As previously discussed, AVEN is designed around two dimensions of content: static and dynamic. This organisational model provides quick access to overviews on asexuality for those seeking basic information through the static content with the ability to read more personal accounts of the experience of asexuality through the dynamic content.

The forums allow for greater ease of access, readability, wider ranges of conversation, increasing translated versions, and different modes of conversation than either HHA or LiveJournal. Jay (2003, pp. 5-6) claims that the division “into sub-forums [...] allows [AVEN] a structure unavailable to most other online asexual communities” where specific topics and content can be further discussed without bogging down the forums and its framework. Hinderliter (2009a, p. 5) adds that a large part of AVEN’s success is because “the domain name asexuality.org, was easier to remember than other asexual sites, the graphics were better, the software was better, David was a better webmaster, and the forums enabled there to be multiple conversations going on at the same time”. Samuel Best and Brian Krueger (2008), in their discussion of internet survey design, offer layout pointers that can increase response rates and are potentially applicable to a forum structure: the design needs to be usable and kept in short manageable format. This requires web masters to keep in mind the lack of uniformity between “hardware, software, or platforms, the presentation of a data collection instrument / may appear differently to users” (Best and Krueger, 2008, pp. 217-218). Other features that attract individuals include “reducing the amount of text, use of subheadings, and use of colour” (Eynon et al., 2008, p.29). AVEN uses a

form of shared governance in web design and maintenance, bringing in community members to help maintain the website so that the community is constantly investing in itself. The forum's topics are broken down into key topic headings and then employ subheadings. For instance, the heading "Asexuality" is broken down into the subheadings like "Asexual Q&A", "Asexual Relationships", "Older Asexuals," and "For Sexual Partners, Friends and Allies" ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). AVEN operates with the colour scheme associated with asexuality—purple, silver and black—making the content very readable, while, at the same time, appealing to the symbolism of asexuality.

Initially AVEN's membership largely consisted of individuals from the United States, Canada and western Europe, but it has managed to increase the heterogeneity of its composition, especially through the development of translated versions of the website (Jay, 2003; [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). According to the AVEN website, there are currently 87,500<sup>5</sup> total members and over 2 million posts ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org); as of January 2017). This figure does not include guests and anonymous users, which average around 120 at any given moment who have been on in the past 15 minutes ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). There are subforums in 17 different languages with the most hits coming from Italian-speaking groups (102,529 hits; this is nearly 80,000 more hits than any other subforum; it is unclear as to why this is the case).

On the forums is a section strictly for polls and census collection. These polls either reflect major concerns or topics within the asexuality community, such as "What are you willing to compromise on" and "Are you 'openly' Asexual" to more interest-focused topics like "College Major" and "How tall are you" ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). The census section is useful for understanding the landscape of the asexual community. For instance, one poll, which started in 2005 and is now locked, asked for individuals' geographical locations. Of the 2,351 members who responded, 15.9% were from the UK, 50% were from the USA, 2.8% from eastern Europe, 7.9% from western Europe, and 5.3% from Australia/NZ/South Pacific, which means that the majority of members were comprised of individuals from predominantly western cultures. Other polls are useful for understanding the behavioural aspects of the [predominantly] asexual population on AVEN. For instance, a poll on masturbation from April 2013 had 241 responses with 22% reporting that they frequently (more than four times a week) masturbated, 34.3% reported that they periodically masturbated (between once every

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<sup>5</sup> In the autumn of 2013, there were 52,089 members.

two weeks up to 4 times a week) and only 9.7% reported never trying it (www.asexuality.org). The follow-up responses predominantly suggest that individuals masturbate as a stress reliever or out of boredom, and masturbating tended to start around the age of 13-16 (28.6%; ages 8-12 was the next highest with 18.6%). Other polls focus on the discussion of the terminology itself. In October 2012, a poll was run asking where and when individuals first learnt the word ‘asexuality’ (www.asexuality.org). Of the 436 members who responded, 22.7% came across the term elsewhere on the Internet, 16.1% from friends/peers, and 14.9% when trying to understand their partner’s lack of sexual attraction. The most common reactions to the term were “it was a good explanation” and curiosity with a desire to read more (www.asexuality.org).

As AVEN has increased in membership (and when thinking about data collected from the census polls), it has become increasingly important to recognise a shifting composition of the community that includes non-asexual members. Frequently, partners of asexuals or curious parties join AVEN to gain additional information and particularly explore the subforums designed for sexual partners, friends, and allies or the Q&A areas. This shift has made it more and more difficult to recognise unlabelled responses that come from a position other than self-identification as an asexual. It has, however, involved sexual voices more strongly on specific topics, like intimate relationships and understandings of the complexity of an asexual-sexual exchange.

#### *1.4.2 The decline of AVEN*

Although still widely used and continuing to be the main platform for asexual research, from 2015 to 2017 conversations among asexuals have increasingly moved to other social media platforms. Most notably has been the emergence of Facebook pages and groups. This shift started off with the development of an AVEN Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/aven.network/>) before smaller groups split from this page one (e.g. UK Asexuality, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1521913398041512/>). The popularity of Facebook groups has increased as people have become increasingly willing [unknowingly?] to display/share their personal information. The AVEN page, for example, is a public group, which means non-members can see all the members and posts. Other groups, such as UK Asexuality, tend to be private or closed pages/groups. Administrators oversee these groups.

These social media groups/pages are more often used to organise local meet-ups and to more readily exchange asexual-related media content. Because they are built in to

already used platforms, it is more user-friendly than AVEN. Further, Facebook allows you to follow conversations without taking part; you can enable notifications to follow those things most important to you.

The emergence of these groups/pages coincides with a time when AVEN's upkeep appears to be decreasing. AVEN's website has a history of crashing, but for many users this unreliability has become increasingly difficult to negotiate. I personally was unable to enter the forums for over a month recently despite trying once per day. Other members have reported similar problems and an exponential growth of slowness on the site. This has made it less practical and less functional. For those who do not mind this, it is still sometimes a preferred site. Unlike Facebook, AVEN offers more privacy and anonymity. This is particularly important for members who are younger and wanting to learn more and those with particular social anxieties.

### *1.5 Research on asexuality from Bogaert to present*

Contemporary research on asexuality started with Bogaert's (2004) study on asexuality. Bogaert examined a national probability sample of British residents "to investigate asexuality, defined as having no sexual attraction to a partner of either sex. Approximately "1% (n=195) of the sample indicated they were asexual" based on this definition (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279). Bogaert (2004, p. 279) claims that his definition investigates the absence of attraction rather than the absence of sexual behaviour, noting that one's lack of sexual attraction does not always correspond to a lack in sexual behaviour. Bogaert (2004, p. 279) does, however, hypothesise that asexuals participate in less sexual behaviour than sexuals: "Some level of sexual activity—perhaps as a result of exploration or to please a partner—is expected for some asexual people, although sexual activity should be much more infrequent in asexual people relative to sexual people". Yet, he fails to ground this claim in data reports. He further hypothesised that asexuals would report fewer sexual partners and later onset of sexual behaviour (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279). The results of Bogaert's (2004) study are often questioned. Nicole Prause and Cynthia Graham (2007, p. 342) note that there are three major limitations to Bogaert's study: (1) "only a single item defined individuals as asexual or sexual"; (2) "by using pre-existing data, constructs previously identified as potential features of asexual identity were not assessed"; and (3) "although Bogaert (2004) examined sexual behaviour frequency as possible predictors of asexuality, there were no questions on solitary sexual activities, including masturbation". Despite understanding these limitations, many researchers do accept the claim that only 1% of

the population is asexual while admitting that a new study needs to be run that properly examines asexuality and identifies individuals no matter if they are familiar with the term (see Yule, 2011 for a potential survey of what this might look like).

Rather than directly challenging Bogaert (2004), contemporary researchers (2008 – 2014) have begun their own ground research. The focus of these topics starts from the point of operationalising asexuality for the purpose of academic research (see Hinderliter, 2009b; Hinderliter, 2009c; Scherrer, 2008; Prause and Graham, 2007). Then the research tends to go into one of two primary directions: identity work (see Yule, 2011; Sundrud, 2011; Prause and Graham, 2007) and/or [intimate] relationship models/understanding different types of attraction and the roles they play in relationships (see Sundrud, 2011; Carrigan, 2011; Hinderliter, 2009a).

### *1.5.1 “Asexuality” definition agreement*

As previously discussed, the definition of asexuality has largely been tied to the communities of asexuals on the Internet, especially AVEN. Hinderliter (2009b) offers two definitions: a broad and a narrow one. The broad definition has the ability to include individuals who “do or feel things generally associated with sexuality”, but who lack sexual attraction, whereas a narrow definition is often used to distinguish asexuality from celibacy and for public visibility purposes (Hinderliter, 2009b, p. 1). The broad, inclusive definition defines asexuality through self-identification (as asexual), but Hinderliter (2009b, p. 6) argues that “this definition has a serious problem: it makes no sense without another definition”. A narrow definition is closer to the AVEN characterisation: “an asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction” ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). However, I would argue that this still could include individuals who “feel things generally associated with sexuality”; a lack of sexual attraction does not necessarily equate to a lack of sexuality; the different definitions are meant to be helpful in examining asexuality, but instead highlight problems and researchers’ assumptions.

Contemporary researchers have yet to agree on how to define “asexuality”. There are three prevalent definitions: (1) definitions that reflect one’s [sexual] behaviour, (2) definitions that reflect one’s [sexual] desires, and (3) self-identification (Poston and Baumle, 2010; Van Houdenhove et al., 2013). The first definition views asexuality in terms of individuals who do no—or appear not—to participate in sexual behaviours. This definition likely stems from nonlibidoists who argue that a “true” asexual is a person who was born without a sex drive and does not participate in any

sexual behaviour ([www.theofficialasexualsociety.com](http://www.theofficialasexualsociety.com)).<sup>6</sup> This definition, however, has proven inconsistent with interviews completed with asexuals, although the majority of those participants were drawn from AVEN (Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010; Hinderliter, 2009b; Sundrud, 2011). While some asexuals do not participate in sexual behaviours or are at least disinterested, participation or lack thereof in sexual behaviours is often not the basis for one's self-identification as asexual and, thus, makes a definition encompassing sexual behaviours inconsistent with the experiences and identification of asexuals.

Defining asexuality in relation to sexual desires<sup>7</sup> as a “lack of sexual attraction” or “little to no sexual attraction” is the most prominent and widely used definition (Hinderliter, 2009; Scherrer, 2008). Prause and Graham (2007) interviewed four participants and noted that the “defining feature of asexuality for these individuals appeared to be a lack of sexual interest or desire, rather than a lack of sexual experience”. While in some long term relationships, sexual partners can enter states of a lack of sexual attraction, Brotto et al. (2010, p. 609) claims that for asexuals this experience is a “persistent or lifelong lack of sexual attraction [which] differentiated from the normative decline in sexual attraction that takes place with relationships’ duration”. The definition first emerged in academic research in Bogaert’s (2004) study where individuals were labelled as asexual if they marked that they had “never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” on a forced-response national survey. That definition is useful to researchers because it mirrors definitions “of hetero/homo/bisexual orientations, and it attempts to tap into beliefs about acceptance of non-heterosexual people” (Hinderliter, 2009b, pp. 11-12).

There are four key methodological issues when studying asexuality using this definition. The first issue is the questionable permanence of sexual attraction. In a definition of “lacking sexual attraction,” it is unclear if that is a permanent state, and, if not, how long a time someone needs to experience this state in order to refer to themselves as an asexual. Or, if modified to include low levels of sexual attraction, then the question is how much sexual attraction defines one as asexual rather than sexual. The second issue is that some individuals “consider themselves to be in the ‘gray area’ between sexual and asexual and chose the orientation other than asexuality they were

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<sup>6</sup> Nonlibidoists are asexuals who claim they have no sex drive / libido and who do not participate in sexual practices. However it is not clear how they define sexual practices.

<sup>7</sup> Sexual desire is used here to refer to sexual desire for another person. Many asexuals can and do desire sexual interactions, sexual behaviours, etc., but this is generally not directed toward a particular person, sex and/or gender.

closest to” (Hinderliter, 2009, p. 619), which suggests that some potential outliers may be excluded. Third, some individuals note their romantic orientation (e.g., heteroromantic asexual) if a question fails to clarify what type of orientation it is investigating and/or if an individual feels “asexuality” does not fully capture their sexuality. Finally, this is the same definition that is featured on AVEN’s webpage ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)), a definition many individuals assume for themselves as part of their collective identity, but it remains unclear as to whether it fully or appropriately applies to individuals’ experiences (Scherrer, 2008; Hinderliter, 2009; Sundrud, 2011). Contemporary researchers rarely mention an even greater methodological issue in using this definition, which is that it is unclear what “sexual attraction” exactly refers to. Some researchers interchange or group sexual attraction with sexual desire (see Scherrer, 2008; Diamond, 2003), but fail to clarify if these two terms refer to the same thing or if they are different experiences. I find sexual desire and sexual attraction are interchangeable if desire only refers to a directional meaning. That is, I understand sexual attraction as “directed libido”: if a person lacks sexual attraction for someone, they similarly lack sexual desire. However, there are instances where a person could experience sexual desire for a particular behaviour, object, etc. An asexual, for instance, might arguably have an interest in masturbation, but ambivalence toward sexual behaviour with other individuals. Arguably, masturbation links to as one’s “sex drive” or “libido”<sup>8</sup>, but that might also be seen as “sexual desire”, while the ambivalence reflects a lack of sexual attraction, which is discussed as the direction of one’s sexual desire toward another ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). If the usage of sexual desire does not clearly refer to one’s desire for a person, it could exclude possible participants. Nonetheless, this is the most widely reported definition given by participants and, therefore, has become the primary definition used in research in the last couple of years.

### *1.5.2 Emerging themes in asexual research*

Recent work has sought to discover the major themes which intersect with individuals’ experiences of asexuality. Using surveys and interviews, Prause and Graham (2007, p. 346) recruited participants from a university pool and online advertisements on [asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org) and [kinseyinstitute.org](http://www.kinseyinstitute.org). Instead of using the term “asexuality”, volunteers were informed that “they would be asked about their ‘sexual

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term “libido” to represent the biological urges for sexual stimulation / release, while recognizing that it is not a biological given. That is, it can have biological basis, but is not necessarily present in all persons.



feelings' (or lack of feelings), sexual experience, and general personality" (Prause and Graham, 2007, p. 346). Five themes were identified in responses referring to what participants expected asexuals to experience: (1) a psychological problem, (2) a very negative sexual experience, (3) no/low sexual desire, (4), no/little sexual experience, and, (5) no differences from the experiences of non-asexuals" (Prause & Graham, 2007, pp. 350-351). There were four reported benefits of asexuality: "(1) avoiding the common problems of intimate relationships, (2) decreasing risks to physical health or unwanted pregnancy, (3) experiencing less social pressure to find suitable partners, and (4) having more free time" (Prause & Graham, 2007, p. 352). Finally, there were four potential drawbacks to asexuality: "(1) problems establishing nonsexual, dyadic intimate relationships, (2) needing to find out what problem is causing the asexuality, (3) a negative public perception of asexuality, and (4) missing the positive aspects of sex" (Prause & Graham, 2007, p. 352). Prause and Graham's (2007) work could easily be misconstrued without complete responses. For instance, according to Prause and Graham's (2007, p. 351, Table 5) results, 15% of asexuals responded that they expected an asexual to experience a psychological problem, but it is unclear if this position referred to a causal relationship between asexuality and psychological problems and/or if responders believed this to be unique to asexuals. However, the study does highlight some of the areas of tension and difficulty for members of the asexual community and their asexual identity development and maintenance. Prause and Graham's (2007) findings also seem to suggest a lack of participation in intimate relationships, but contradicting views on whether this is positive or negative.

Brotto et al. (2010) investigated major themes related to asexuality. Using randomly selected participants recruited for their first study from AVEN, Brotto et al. (2010, p. 609) administered telephone interviews in order to "gain a better understanding of the experiences of asexuals". They then coded for 10 themes: (1) a definition of asexuality; (2) feeling different; (3) distinguishing romantic from asexual relationships; (4) asexuality as not a disorder; (5) overlap with schizoid personality; (6) motivations for masturbation; (7) technical language; (8) negotiating boundaries in relationships; (9) religion; and (10) a need to educate and destigmatize (Brotto et al., 2010). Theme three, six, and eight were useful for me when considering my own research. Brotto et al. (2010, p. 610) reports that many participants sought "closeness, companionship, intellectual, and emotional connection that comes from romantic relationships, and in this regard, they were similar to sexual individuals who desire closeness and intimacy" with many conversations also including topics of marriage and

children. They also found that a large percent of the interviewees reportedly masturbated. This reflects “a strong sentiment that ‘sex with oneself’ was qualitatively different from sex with another in that the former can exist without sexual attraction” (so too can the latter, I would argue; Brotto et al., 2010, p. 611). Brotto et al. (2010, p. 611) further argue that “in regards to masturbation, the motivation stemmed more from physical/physiologic needs rather than from emotional or relational reasons”. They noted reluctance to discuss this topic openly, which may reflect an uncertainty in the asexual community as to whether or not masturbatory practices disqualify an individual from identifying as asexual. The frequency of masturbation, however, raises very important questions for how asexuals understand [sexual] behaviours, assuming the behaviours are even viewed as sexual.

Brotto et al. (2010, p. 612) also noted that 26% of women and 9% of men were currently in relationships and 70% reported previous relationships. Asexuals in a relationship with another asexual reported “little need for negotiating sexual activity” because of shared disinterest in sex (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 612). These participants expressed intimate closeness including behaviours such as lying naked together in bed free of sexual expectation (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 612). Asexuals in a relationship with a sexual discussed conversations they had with their partners to outline “what types of sexual activities they were willing to take part in, the frequency, and the boundaries around the relationship in the event that the asexual did not engage in any sexual activity with his/her sexual partner”, and their motivations included a desire to make their partner happy and sometimes an experience of emotional closeness (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 612). It would be useful to explore this theme further in order to understand more of the motivations behind sexual participation, the location of asexuality in the relationship, the common threads between how asexuals act within their relationships, and to correct misperceptions regarding asexuals’ ability to have intimate relationships and the form of those relationships.

Dawson et al. (2016) and Scott et al. (2016) asked participants to complete research diaries to explore the practices of intimacy among asexual people and the process of nonbecoming, respectively.<sup>9</sup> They defined asexuality as “low levels of sexual attraction and/or desire” (Dawson et al., 2016, p. 1). What was unique about their work was that—other than their exploration of intimacy among asexuals—they were particularly interested in the operation of an asexual identity. Scott et al. (2016, p. 273)

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<sup>9</sup> These articles came out of the same research project.

found a subset of participants for whom “asexuality was not always experienced as a social identity” and some saw it as “an attribute of marginal importance”. One of their participants, Lisa, explained that “because nobody else knows [that I’m asexual], it’s fairly meaningless. Nobody else would say I have that identity because I don’t, to them” (Scott et al., 2016, p. 274). What is unclear is why participants like Lisa prefer not to share their identity; what is it that makes it irrelevant?<sup>10</sup> It is also unknown if these participants are in intimate relationships and whether the practice of intimacy changes the articulation of an asexual identity.

Dawson et al. (2016, pp. 1-2) argue that “it is difficult to claim there are distinctly ‘asexual practices of intimacy’”, but did find a pattern of asexuals making “pragmatic adjustments and engag[ing] in negotiations to achieve the forms of physical and emotional intimacy they seek”. Dawson et al. (2016) offer a comprehensive look at asexuals’ intimacy practices. They found that friends “were the most commonly mentioned source of intimacy” (Dawson et al., 2016, p. 7). Some of their participants were in partnered intimate relationships and discussed taking part in sexual practices. A few participants explained that the reasoning behind this was “societal pressure and expectation” (Dawson et al., 2016, p. 9). One participant, Simone, explained that “having sex was something she did for the good of the relationship as a unit and because it was something she could do to make [her partner] happy”. Dawson et al. (2016, p. 10) argue that this is an example of how “relationships create a certain definition of the situation and expectations upon actors”. These expectations are then negotiated and can be embraced as something one wants to do. Dawson et al. (2016) are suggesting asexuals have agency through their negotiation choices. However, this suggests a fixed nature to the intimate relationship, which may limit understandings of who is in an intimate relationship despite someone feeling they are. What makes the expectations for these intimate relationships include something sexual and is there a problem with always being in a state of constant negotiation?

As Brotto et al. (2010) found, many asexuals seek companionship and emotional intimacy with another person that is separate from their sexual attraction. Jay (2003, p. 9) noticed this pattern early on in the formation of AVEN. This led to a dialogue that reimagined the classification of “attractions” and opened up new boundaries and conversations about intimate relationships. According to Hinderliter (2009a, p. 3) part of the reason asexuality is defined as a lack of sexual attraction is specifically to

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<sup>10</sup> This line of questioning may be more interesting to me because I practice identity politics.

highlight “other kinds of attraction (i.e. emotional/romantic attraction)”. The distinction between sexual and romantic attraction has led to two new means of identification: variation in levels of sexual attraction and identification through one’s romantic orientation. These different types of attractions allow for the formation of other types of intimate relationships that do not necessarily require sexual attraction as a prerequisite.

The emergence of the distinction between sexual and romantic attraction moved asexuality onto a spectrum of variable levels of sexual attraction. New identities emerged “such as demisexual, hyposexual, romantic, and aromantic asexual, hyperromantic, straight-A, gay-A, bi-A, gray-A, etc.” (Chasin, 2011, p. 715). Until this division, many individuals, including asexuals, struggled to understand different feelings of potential sexual attraction, romantic attraction or incident-specific forms of [sexual] attraction and were unsure if they belonged in the category of asexual or sexual. For instance, “demisexuals experience sexual attraction as a consequence of romantic attraction but not independently of it. When they are emotionally connected to a person, sexual attraction may ensue but only directed toward that person” (Carrigan, 2011, p. 470). Demisexuals, thus, function somewhere between being an asexual and a sexual.

Romantic orientation is understood as the pattern or preference of one’s romantic interest in individuals. Sundrud (2011, p. 13) outlines several of the different types of romantic orientations (though her list is not exhaustive of all the types of romantic attractions): bi-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to members of both sexes”); hetero-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to the opposite sex”); homo-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to the same sex”); and aromantic (“a person who does not experience romantic attraction”). Many asexuals report “their relationship in terms of their romantic relation rather than sexual” (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 603), suggesting that the romantic element is an important feature in partner selection, relationship boundaries and self-identification. For instance, Nora, a self-identified bi-romantic asexual in Scherrer’s (2008, p. 635) study, explained that because “sexual attraction is not a factor” in her intimate relationships, then “it doesn’t make sense that gender would play that much of a role” in who she is romantically attracted to. Nora explains that it is the personality she is attracted to and, that is the basis for how she forms romantic attachments. Scherrer (2008, p. 634) argues that many of these relationships also are “primarily monogamous, dyadic relationships similar to many sexual relationships”. There is little additional research that further explores what romantic orientation means within an asexual relationship or why individuals choose/are

certain romantic orientations. This is likely a result of the emergence of romantic orientation into asexual discourse, but further study of this dimension would yield a more in-depth understanding of the intricacies of asexuals' intimate relationships. It is largely from this gap in asexual research that I am motivated to explore and bring to light what an asexual relationship looks like. With deeper analysis, the full complexity of the intersection of sexual orientation, romantic orientation and sexual behaviour can be explored.

### *1.6 Heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and the public story*

At the beginning of this chapter, I relayed my exchange with my friend regarding her partner and discussed my difficulty in understanding sexuality. At that time, I did not recognise that there were multiple ways of being sexual, that sexuality was a state of plurality and varied practices and that what I was in fact struggling with was the heteronormative public story (HPS). Heterosexuality is “traditionally defined as involving attraction, interest or desire between persons of the ‘opposite’ sex (understood as men and women), and sexual relations between them” (Beasley et al., 2012, p. 1). Driven by a historical [and contemporary] cultural practice that privileges heterosexual coupledness and condemns participation in other sexual practices as sin, illegal and/or a mental disturbance, heterosexuality was established as commonplace and the compulsory [sexual and intimate] practice.

Academic attention on compulsory heterosexuality challenged the “order of patterned sexual-gender divisions and hierarchies” (Jackson and Scott, 2010, p. 77). Barker and Gabb (2016) found that many couples value the everydayness<sup>11</sup> rather than the heterosexual norms, such as penetrative sex. Heterosexuality appears to be exceptionally varied with different practices among each couple. The *normativity* of heterosexuality, though, is what has been problematic. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 26) define heteronormativity as the “policing or related, mutually reinforcing norms directing gendered behaviour *and* sexual orientation”. Heteronormativity drives public understandings and perceptions of intimate relationships and sexual practices and becomes the public story.

Jamieson (1998) argues that established practices form an assumed “public story”. These stories are part of the content that people consume from the media. In this instance, the HPS, is the compilation of a set of heteronormative practices. In their book

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<sup>11</sup> Everydayness refers to the intimacy of one's day-to-day activities such as doing dishes because a partner has had a difficult day or watching a show together.

*Rewriting the Rules* (2013a), Barker discusses some of these practices and the problems with them. Barker (2013a, p. 3) argues that these messages are reproduced and passed on to us through our music, “reality TV”, “[b]illboard advertisements”. Barker (2013a, p. 3) claims that “[n]ever before in our history has there been more advice on who and how to love”. The practices that comprise the HPS include compulsory, penetrative sex. Sex should be “*normal*” and “*great*” within which “we mustn’t communicate openly about what we really want sexually” (Barker, 2013a, pp. 59-60). The HPS is part of the narrative that suggests you must find “The One”, that love conquers all, that the relationship ought to be monogamous and that monogamy is everything for you and your partner (Barker, 2013a, p. 42).

Throughout this thesis I argue that the HPS has [mis]guided my participants’ intimate practices. It informed their process of dating, highlighted the epitome of the [male] orgasm and pressured a relationship that included penetrative sex. Barker (2013a, p. 72) notes that “most people frequently make themselves have sex that they don’t really want, and try to force their own sexuality in the directions that they think it should go”, which highlights the pervasiveness of the HPS. For many asexuals, the HPS was the only conceptualisation of a sexuality established around sexual attraction readily available, which meant that they were particularly vulnerable to the persuasiveness of these expected performances when their own practices (or lack thereof) were policed.

Some people have found ways to challenge the HPS through the increased practice and acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships, living apart together couples, polyromanticism, etc. However, some of these “alternative” relationships fail to actually challenge the HPS. According to Sundrud (2011, p. 2) “the LGBT community has reappropriated the heteronormative expectations of dating, marriage, and childrearing to create, what I term, a sexual normativity. [...] Instead of creating new models for partnered relationships, same sex partners are adhering to the benchmarks of heteronormativity through their desire to have a marriage ceremony and by raising children”. This reappropriation points to a process of interaction between heteronormativity and emerging sexual orientations/identities. Throughout this thesis I explore where asexuals locate themselves within the HPS framework, focusing on how the HPS limits the asexual intimate experience, what aspects of the HPS help asexuals self-identify and/or explain their intimate practices and how much the HPS influences asexual practices and its related negotiations.

### *1.7 Intimacy and the intimate relationship*

“Intimacy” is a broad term that is not well-defined. Holt et al. (2009, p. 147) claim that “conventional definitions of intimacy encompass factors related to closeness, disclosure, activity sharing, sexuality and affection”, which, aside for a strong declaration of sexuality, is similar to the way some of my participants defined their experiences of intimacy. Hand et al. (2012, p. 9) describe intimacy as “a feeling of closeness with another person as well as a tendency to self-disclose to the other individual”. Neither of these conventionally accepted definitions, however, captures the layers of intimacy. These broader definitions over-rely on assumed understanding of “closeness” and “intimacy”. Is intimacy a behaviour, an experience, a framework? It is not clear. Hines (2007, p. 35) uses the term “intimacy” to “refer to close, caring personal relationships that are both sexually (partners and lovers) and non-sexually (friendships) experienced and practised”. While this expands the view of intimacy to consider the scope of different types of relationships, Hines’ (2007) definition implies a necessary sexual element with partners and lovers, which is inconsistent with my own findings throughout this research and the experiences of many of my participants. Her view of intimacy suggests a focus on physical interactions—physical intimacy—within intimate relationships and ignores the other types of intimacy noted in intimate relationships. Yoo et al. (2014, p. 276) define intimacy as “partners’ general sense of closeness with each other”, but expand the definition, stating that “intimacy is also a multidimensional construct that can be measured in intellectual, interpersonal, affective, and physical aspects of the couple relationships”. Yoo et al. (2014, p. 276) argue that current research, even when it discusses more than one type of intimacy, fails to examine their overlap, “which can lead to overestimation of one [intimacy] or the other”. Because I wanted to create a taxonomy of intimacy as it pertained to asexuals, I intentionally resisted points of overlap. It was my intention to emphasise those types of intimacy that were particularly important to my participants.

There is little agreement as to what the different types of intimacy are and if they are permanent categorisations. Like Yoo et al. (2014), Greeff and Melherbe (2001, p. 250) present a multidimensional view, dividing intimacy into: “(a) emotional intimacy—the ability to feel close to someone; (b) social intimacy—the ability to share mutual friends and similarities in social networks; (c) sexual intimacy—the ability to share general affection and/or sexual activities; (d) intellectual intimacy—the experience of shared ideas; and (e) recreational intimacy—shared interest in hobbies or joint participation in sport”. Holt et al.’s (2009, p. 149) break intimacy into three

dimensions—emotional, “which implies mutual accessibility, naturalness, nonpossessiveness, and a commitment to the relationship”; physical, “which includes touching and embracing”; and intellectual, which involves the sharing of ideas and the presentation of our social selves—and defines them in similar ways. Layder (2009) takes a slightly different approach, organising intimacy more in terms of its frequency of presence and its fluctuation of power: dynamic, episodic, semi-detached, pretence, manipulative and oppressive. The first three are marked by the stability of intimacy exchange, which fails to actually articulate the meaning of intimacy and the different ways it can operate. The latter two refer to a power flow within intimate relationships. Manipulative intimacy is where “the controller’s wishes and interests come first and the whole package is sealed with insincerity and double-dealing, but stops short of physical coercion [...] under the guise of ‘care’ and ‘support’, the controller’s needs and desires are serviced at the expense of his or her partner” (Layder, 2009, p. 34). Oppressive intimacy is where both partners “are fairly equally matched and manipulate each other. But both are insecure and over-reliant on the other to boost their confidence and self-esteem [...] and are therefore anxious about allowing one another to have ‘outside’ relationships with friends, or even family” (Layder, 2009, p. 34).

Based on the behaviours of my participants, what they desired from their intimate relationship and in reflection of the prior research, I defined intimacy as an experience of closeness—which is clarified by notions of trust, disclosure, communication and vulnerability—that results from a behaviour or interaction with/toward another. I then selected four dimensions of intimacy: physical, emotional, intellectual and social. I combined “social” and “recreational intimacy” due to the way they often overlapped, but otherwise agreed largely with Holt et al.’s (2009) division of intimacy. Layder’s (2009) view of intimacy was useful for thinking about intimacy, but I would argue that it relates more closely to the frequency of intimacy rather than offering a firmer understanding of intimacy.

Although physical intimacy was not the most sought type of intimacy for the majority of my participants, I unexpectedly found it was the most widely discussed. In particular, it was noted in relation to asexuals’ need to assert their identities. By interacting in seemingly physically intimate behaviours, my participants reported a need to assert their identity and experienced a lack of validation—mostly from partners and peers, but sometimes also from themselves—of their identity as an asexual, their own intimate needs and the value of those needs. In connection to physical intimacy, there was a need to clarify [to intimate partners] their intention and motivation for



participating in physical behaviours. This largely came out of the need to assert their asexual identity, but it also related to the way my participants framed physical behaviours, especially sexual behaviours. Sometimes behaviours one might call traditionally sexual were equated to household chores and other times, seemingly non-sexual interactions were framed as sexual. Further, although asexuals participated in many behaviours that other sexual orientations would deem as significant for their physically [sexual] intimate needs, I found that while physical intimacy was still a desired feature in some relationships, many of the practices I expected to generate physical intimacy were actually motivated by the pursuit for other types of intimacy (e.g. intellectual, emotional).

Thus when developing a taxonomy of intimacy relevant to asexuals, I needed a working definition of physical intimacy that was not purely contained by sexual interactions. This definition had to allow for the inclusion of non-sexual—often attributed by my participants as “romantic”—physical behaviours. Within academic research, there were two types of intimacies that were functionally relevant to a discussion around physicality and its related intimacy: sexual intimacy and physical intimacy. In their discussion of sexual behaviours, my participants discussed their sexual performance in terms of physical closeness rather than sexual bonding, making it a less useful definition to work from. Instead, I sought to categorise intimacy generated from physicality wholly as “physical intimacy”.

Greff and Melherbe (2001) define physical intimacy as “the ability to share general affection and/or sexual activities”. This definition is useful because unlike other definitions of physical intimacy, its inclusion of “general affection” allows for the recognition of romantic behaviours that generate physical intimacy and resists equating physical intimacy to sexual intimacy. The addition of romantic behaviours is relevant given asexuals’ high reporting of physical behaviours they view as “romantic” and intimate (e.g. cuddling). I argue that “general affection” also introduces nuance to the way traditionally sexual behaviours are analysed. That is, when considering an individual’s reported behaviours, a distinction between general affection and more sexual activities forces closer examination of the meaning and intention behind reported interactions. For instance, among my participants, many behaviours one might view as sexual (e.g. masturbation) were often contextualised in non-sexual ways and traditionally non-sexual behaviours (e.g. handholding) were sometimes perceived as very sexual. Further, while not part of Greff and Melherbe’s (2001) argument, the term

“general affection” might provide a way to categorise and understand physical interactions that asexuals participated in for their intimate partner.

Based on the available definitions and the scope of physical intimacy for my participants, I decided to define physical intimacy as “the closeness attained and/or initiated from physical interactions and general affection”. Despite settling on this definition, I find it problematic. It fails to provide an explanation for how behaviours can reportedly be experienced as close in some instances, but negatively impacts intimacy in other instances. The definition is possibly missing an element related to the role of intent to more clearly understand the variation. Rather than including these aspects into the definition, I instead highlight instances where behaviours fluctuated in their meanings and operation. The definition also does not capture the process for how I decided to understand behaviours as being physically intimate rather than another type of intimacy. As I reviewed my participants’ narratives, I looked specifically for discussions of physical interactions that created or stifled closeness along with how the behaviours did and did not generate intimacy. I paid particular attention to key words/phrases related to other types of intimacy and where variations were distinctly marked. Sometimes participants directly stated their meaning. I also asked participants, when discussing their intimate behaviours, to describe which aspects they viewed as sexual, romantic and platonic. I then divided these behaviours into self-identified sexual behaviours and romantic behaviours.

While participants sometimes sought physical intimacy, the intimacy they most often preferred was emotional intimacy. Hines (2007, p. 130), in her discussion of the way her transgender participants minimise the role of sex, like many of my asexual participants, argues that “[i]n de-centring sex within their relationships, [her participants] challenge the notion that sex is central to partnering and emphasise the role of emotional care”.<sup>12</sup> Given Hines’ (2007) findings, I expected emotional intimacy to be the main form of intimacy sought by my participants, but it was interesting to see how well my participants’ emotional needs matched current academic understandings of emotional intimacy. With the emphasis on emotional closeness, I thought I would see a particularly unique aspect, feature or weighing of emotional intimacy, but I did not.

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<sup>12</sup> “However, it should be noted that emotional and sexual aspects of intimacy may also influence couple relationship outcomes in distinct ways. In clinical settings, it is sometimes observed that sexually satisfied partners do not necessarily feel emotionally close; similarly, partners’ feelings of emotional closeness and connectedness may not guarantee sexual satisfaction” (Yoo et al., 2014, p. 276)

Functionally, emotional intimacy was expected and operated for asexuals the same way it does for sexuals.

For analysing emotional intimacy, I relied on Holt et al.'s (2009, p. 149) definition of emotional intimacy "which implies mutual accessibility, naturalness, nonpossessiveness, and a commitment to the relationship". I considered other definitions, such as Greeff and Melherbe (2001, p. 250), where emotional intimacy is defined as the "ability to feel close to someone", and Williams (1985, p. 588), in a discussion of emotional exchange in women's same-sex friendships, who suggests that emotional intimacy is comprised of "mutual self-disclosure, shared feelings, and other demonstrations of emotional closeness". However, Greeff and Melherbe's (2001) definition fails to qualify "closeness", and Williams (1985) only covers some of the features I noticed among my participants. That being said, Holt et al.'s (2009) definition does not fully match my participants' reported experiences either. Among my participants I noted emotional intimacy related to behaviours that generated self-disclosure, which is similar to "naturalness"; nonpossessiveness, but in relation to shared emotional vulnerability and emotional space; and a commitment to the relationship.

When someone offers to tell you a secret, there is a feeling of satisfaction: you are wanted, you are trusted, you are special. Self-disclosure is the practice of revealing the self and sharing one's secrets. Feeling as though you can disclose and being disclosed to can create a sense of closeness, which I have categorised as emotional intimacy. Nicholson (2013, p. 41) argues that self-disclosure is a new element of our public and private lives derived from the break[ing]down of social scripts and the development of online public spaces where individuals create profiles of themselves in order to become known. While I do not quite agree that self-disclosure is altogether new, I agree that people have become seemingly more complex in western cultures where individualism is the dominant practice and thus most people enter intimate relationships with vague—at best stereotypical—understandings of one another. More and more, the perceptions individuals have of their partner(s) stem from their partner's social media platform(s). Further, Moss and Schwebel (1993, p. 33) claim that self-disclosure is "a facilitator rather than a component of intimacy". I agree that sometimes self-disclosure can function as a facilitator, but other times, the act of self-disclosing is in itself an intimate act that generates emotional intimacy, but I would hypothesise that it only functions as an act of intimacy when the individual perceives that exchange to have been heard, understood and/or reciprocated.

Sharing of the self is particularly relevant to my participants because being known creates a sense of validation of who you are and especially who they are as asexuals. Sharing of the self included revealing one's wants, goals and problems. This behaviour was mentioned most frequently in relation to relationship negotiation. As I will be discussing intimate relationships and their related negotiation in chapter 5, I will not be presenting too many of these excerpts, but one area that did not relate to these negotiations was the discussion of the day-to-day exchange. Tori (genderqueer female, 26, Jewish), for example, explained that it was very important for her "to have someone to talk about everything and to share common interests with". As in any relationship, the sharing of mundane day-to-day can also be significant. Platypus, likewise, discussed how, before meeting his partner in person, he would "spend hours on the phone every night, mostly just talking about life in general, [their] interests, and what happened that day" which allowed them to grow closer together and value their minute wants and desires. These day-to-day exchanges were low-levels of self-disclosure that required less amounts of trust and vulnerability, but still created a sense of closeness and feeling known.

Holt et al. (2009) include "non-possessiveness" as a feature of emotional intimacy, and, for my participants, often operated in conjunction with self-disclosure. While not Holt et al.'s (2009) intention, I now utilise this word to refer to creating safe spaces (physical and non-physical): space of trust and shared vulnerabilities. The use of "non" suggests that the intimate relationships are lacking something whereas the intimate behaviours described by my participants *create*. The formation of safe spaces includes those behaviours which form ease or comfortability in a relationship, reliability between partners, mutual trust (e.g. exchanging personal secrets) and exposing vulnerabilities. For Robin (cisgender, male, 24, Scottish/Swedish), creating a space of comfort and trust was done through his partner's humour: "She's hilarious, which I love, and her sense of humour doesn't go away when we're physically intimate, which makes me way more comfortable". While he is not the person creating the humour, he sought a partner who places him at ease and provides a comfortable space to explore their intimacy. Robin directly discusses the role this places into physical intimacy, but actually this is an instance where emotional intimacy is the precedent for later physical intimacy. The exchange of emotional closeness and playfulness makes Robin feel more open to some of his partner's physical intimacy.

In my discussion on physical intimacy, I explained how vulnerability was most often mentioned in relation to the body. There were some instances where it was

discussed in terms of generating emotional intimacy. Sam (cisgender female, 20, Canadian) discussed states of vulnerability and how entering these states created intimacy: “Well we’re able to be vulnerable with each other, cry in front of each other and things like that. I think that’s very intimate”. Other participants discussed coming home to their partner and collapsing next to them; fighting with a friend in front of their partner; and “goofing around”. Each of these behaviours requires individuals to reveal weakness, to share struggle and/or to open up to a sense of unknown. When those positions of vulnerability are reciprocated and/or acknowledged rather than taken advantage of, it is possible that those involved can: build closeness, bond over particular experiences, exchange emotional difficulties in a healthy way and/or feel at ease. All of these are forms and parts of emotional intimacy.

Another type of safe space was the experience of feeling reassured about the state of one’s intimate relationship(s): statements or behaviours that validated the continuation of the intimate relationship. However, because these behaviours sometimes functioned in different ways, depending on the type of relationship,<sup>13</sup> I chose to separate practices of commitment from those behaviours which created safe spaces.<sup>14</sup> When I was in an intimate relationship with a heterosexual partner, a part of me always expected there would be a time my partner would request an open relationship. I did not doubt his commitment to what we had *per se*, but I wondered about my own abilities to fulfil the type of commitment he needed. Because of this personal experience, I thought my participants would similarly undercut expectations of commitment if they were in a relationship with a sexual. Instead, my findings were somewhat inconclusive when examining mixed relationships, but I found frequent behaviours of validating commitment among participants in other types of relationships. Caf (cisgender female, 21, American, heteroromantic) briefly discussed how she and her partner were “definitely romantic and passionate about each other—and by ‘passionate’ [she] mean[t] ‘fiercely devoted’ not ‘lustful’”. Caf had a confident understanding of her partner’s commitment to the relationship, but did not describe a direct exchange off and on. This practice was not a part of their emotional intimacy. Among other participants in intimate relationships with a sexual partner, it was not often mentioned. However, it was a noticeable part of other types of intimate relationships. For example, Cynthia (non-

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<sup>13</sup> Type of relationships are discussed in chapter 5, but include asexual-asexual, asexual-sexual (mixed), platonic intimate and polyamorous.

<sup>14</sup> Safe spaces also dealt more with respecting boundaries of distance. Often my participants requested certain amounts of physical space, their own bedrooms, etc., which is very much about being apart whereas commitment is an attention to togetherness.

gender female, 30, Chinese, polyamorous) stated: A. L and I do express our emotional intimacy in our emails, such as saying how happy we are in this relationship, how we hope to meet up and have ‘cuddle threesomes’, etc.’. Cynthia reported that there was a persistent exchange of reassurance and future planning, both which develop emotional intimacy: it is a validation of their intimate relationship(s).

While there was variation in the expression of commitment, I identified interactions of mutual accessibility that developed emotional intimacy in all types of intimate relationships. Holt et al. (2009) employ the term “mutual accessibility”, but do not explore the way this term can be divided into two aspects: emotional and physical. Because of the growth of communication technology (e.g. smart phones, video chats), it is possible for individuals to be emotionally accessible without necessarily being physically accessible. Emotional accessibility refers to how able a person is to reach out to their intimate partner for emotional support. For example, Katya described how important it is that she is able to receive comfort from her partner; that there is a means through which it can occur. ADP spoke about how his partner “always checks in with how [ze is] feeling”. Although these were part of a broader conversation around intimacy, I would not always classify these interactions as building emotional intimacy. In ADP’s experience, there is a clear exchange, which can stimulate temporary closeness (emotional intimacy), but what Katya detailed is more so a factor of emotional stability.

Physical accessibility was relevant, however, to building emotional intimacy, but in a way I could have never predicted: some participants sought *distance* to maintain emotional closeness. Shaw (2013, p. 103) asks, “Which feels less safe: loneliness or intimacy?” and argues that individuals want both “closeness” and “distance”. Shaw is referring to “having space”: going about one’s day to day without one’s partner right there. For my participants, it was more than that. Sometimes it was a matter of “having separate bedrooms” or “working on our own in the same room”—capped physical proximity. Kay (cisgender female, 24 American), for example, stated:

I like companionship in the sense of being around someone, but not necessarily physically touching all the time. In the same room, both of us doing our own thing, but occasionally chatting [...].

In Kay’s interaction with her partner she is acting largely through inaction. Being physically around someone—being in a person’s space—but enjoying generally doing

nothing with them. My participants often discussed the closeness and comfortability that comes out of feeling comfortable doing absolutely nothing together. The frequency of this behaviour suggests a high valuing of independence within the intimate relationship, but I do not believe this is necessarily unique to asexuals in intimate relationships. Shaw (2013, p. 103) claims that “[w]e want closeness, and we want distance; we want connectedness, and we want solitude”. However, there were other times where participants wanted greater distance. Alex (cisgender female, 23, Canadian) claimed that her intimate relationship lasted because of how infrequently they were around and available to one another: distance really did make the heart grow fonder. When they would see each other, the separation helped heighten the experience together.

In this research, I have attempted to allow themes to emerge from the data as much as possible, but when analysing behaviours and their related types of intimacy, it was difficult to ignore the severe lack of reference to social intimacy. It was the least discussed intimacy type and included few behaviours. Van Hooff (2013, p. 46) found among her heterosexual participants that the “motivation to commit to a particular partner is usually described as based on compatibility, having a shared friendship group or things in common”. Greeff and Melherbe (2001, p. 250) define having a shared friendship group as social intimacy: “the ability to share mutual friends and similarities in social networks”. I expanded this definition to include recreational intimacy (shared hobbies and activities) as the behaviours (when they arose) were reportedly experienced in similar ways. So, social intimacy was thus defined as any behaviour that stimulated closeness through shared and/or connected friendship and kinship/familial groups as well as any behaviour that involved sharing a hobby with intent to connect over/through it as social intimacy.

Social intimacy generally presented through sharing hobbies. ADP (agender female, 28, American), for instance, discussed that hir and hir partner “have strong common interests”, but ze only “thinks” that influenced her feelings. Ze gives little weight to the role of common interests and this is more noticeable by comparing it to the attention ze gives when discussing other types of intimacy. Dora (demi-female, 20, Dutch) was the only participant who attributed more significant value to social intimacy. Dora preferred a partner who played music:

Ideally, he would be musical and (even better) play a classical musical instrument. [...] Music is a really large piece of my life, so it feels necessary for

any partner of mine to be at least interested in something that is so important to me. Making music together isn't necessary, though it is fun to do.

Dora's day-to-day life involved music, but much in the way a person follows a particular religion, speaks a certain language, etc. Music appeared to be more of a way of being rather than a hobby. While she did describe wanting to share it with her partner, she really is desiring a partner who supports her passion rather than partakes. Even in this single instance of seemingly social intimacy, there is very little to go on.

Other participants discussed more one-off events (e.g., movies, dinners, trips, walks) that they do with their partners to bring them closer together, but I found that like physical intimacy, there was an attention to the needs of one's partner(s) when discussing some of these interactions. Heart (demi-female, 23, Canadian/English) discussed:

I want to take them out to dinner, and do things to make them happy. I want to make them feel special to me, and to just generally aim for a smile. I want to cuddle and feel special in return. Watch movies on our laptops while cuddling in bed [...].

Kippa (cisgender female, 25, American) likewise stated: "We also do day trips to places because my partner loves to travel and I love to spend money on experiences rather than the material. We go out to movies and dinners."

Both Kippa and Heart participated in socially intimate activities for their partner, to "make them feel special" (and for Heart, herself subsequently). It is unclear why my participants do not seek or at least do not discuss seeking social intimacy. Greeff and Melherbe (2001, p. 254) found that men in their sample were more dissatisfied with recreational aspects of their relationship than the women. Based on their findings, I would expect that with a largely female sample (although not all cisgender), I would find at least more mentions of social intimacy. Among my male participants, only one, Platypus (cisgender male, 31, American), discussed social intimacy with his partner [through gaming], and this was a positive experience.

Social intimacy may be something attributed more so to extroverted individuals. While I did not collect data on which participants label themselves as introvert/extrovert nor have a measurement available, AVEN's yearly census always notes a much higher number of reported self-identified introverts ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org) – fetch stats for one



being run now). Because introverts stereotypically prefer their independence and social space, it may be that this is also represented within their intimate relationship practices. No matter if it can be related back to extro/introversion, a majority of my participants stressed the importance of having their own space, “my time” and even physical separation. It was not that they necessarily rejected social intimacy, but their own boundaries were that much more important. It is possible that the absence of a wider discussion around social intimacy may relate back to the fear of jeopardising one’s identity and/or boundaries.

### *1.8 Conclusion*

Asexuality was first theorised as a sexual orientation in Kinsey’s (1948) research and then briefly reframed in Storm’s work (1980). Because of a lack of visibility and the absence of a community and the omnipresence of the HSP, many people who now identify as asexuals were incorrectly labelled as having a disorder. There was an assumption that a lack of sexual attraction was in some way unnatural. Similarly, ableist views constructed narratives around persons with disabilities to suggest that they were somehow not sexual beings. These two misidentifications together formed the basis of a view of asexuality as a sexual practice: rather than being a lack of sexual attraction, asexuality was associated with a lack of sexual practices.

With the formation of online communities, people who lacked sexual attraction could now chat, share and begin to discover an asexual identity and sexual orientation. Online communities such as AVEN and HHA brought asexuals together and, now with the increased fixation on social media platforms, these communities are spreading. Visibility and awareness continue to increase. Likewise, research on asexuals and asexuality has become popular. While early research first focused largely on sought to pinpoint a definition of asexuality, later research explored emerging themes (e.g. identity, feeling different, negotiation).

However, very little of this research investigates the complexity of asexuals in intimate relationships, which is the gap in research that this thesis aims to fill. It is my aim to understand how asexuality as an identity and as a sexual orientation operates within intimate relationships. From the analysis, I then have the opportunity to examine the relationship between asexuals intimate relationships and heteronormativity to interrogate the HSP and broaden our understandings of intimacy.

In the next chapter, I outline how I came to research asexuals in intimate relationships and the research model I selected. The rest of the thesis is my analysis (1)

to understand how asexuality functions as a meaningful label, including the adoption of an asexual identity and (2) to investigate patterns of intimate practices—partner selection, relationship types and forms of intimacy—and their connection to heteronormativity, an asexual identity or both. Through this analysis, I aim to recognise an asexual sexual discourse and challenge the structure of the intimate relationship.

## Chapter 2: Me, myself and my methodology

### 2.1 *The self as a starting point*

This is my story. While, yes, it is a thesis that is focused on the analysis and subsequent theorisation of narratives from other asexuals and their intimate relationships, it is also a representation of the intersection of my identities as both an asexual and a feminist. Initially, I thought that my feminism and asexual identity would function in a complementary way, that as I analysed my research, it would be from a consistent epistemological lens. I expected that the ways in which I challenged social institutions as a feminist would be the foundation for disputing heteronormative understandings of the intimate relationship as an asexual. Instead I found a collision of views and practise. My core feminist values have been shaped by radical feminist thinking, which I recognise are extremely problematic and are not the whole of my feminist identity.<sup>15</sup> I have spent a good deal of political energy promoting awareness and generating conversations around female sexuality and, more specifically, ‘the woman’ as sexual. I found the political arguments around ‘the woman’ as sexual particularly useful for interrogating compulsory heterosexuality. However, the way radical feminism offers alternative social structures and develops sexual politics leaves little room for an asexual agenda: a political argument that forces increased recognition of the plurality, multiplicity and complexity of sexuality [for women] can be helpful for furthering understandings of sexualities and practice, but they revolved largely around *being* sexual, which is not always consistent with asexual practice. As I progressed through my analysis, though, I soon recognised that these two agendas did not have to and should not contradict each other. I established a way of defining sexuality that was not wholly sexual, that did not inherently connect a sexual orientation with particular sexual practices and that offered the opportunity to explore the layers of intimate relationships. My position within both of these identities developed because of this resolution.

Throughout my thesis, I relied on these identities to interrogate not only what my participants said, but what I thought, viewed and challenged. My questions were designed around my struggle negotiating these positions. I selected methods that

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<sup>15</sup> I root my personal sources of oppression in patriarchy. Cultural Radical Feminism fascinated me for the way it reimagined feminine qualities that are often undervalued. Part of my feminism is around reclaiming the feminine as powerful—giving it value. I was influenced by works such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Daly Gyn/Ecology. I recognise that this is a severely limited view of feminism, however, and more modern issues necessitate a more intersectional approach.

reflected my cyberfeminist interests and technology's relationship to sexual politics. My analysis, while critical, was very reflexive as I located myself within it. Each of these identities informed different aspects of my model for exploring identity and sexuality and allowed me to constantly challenge myself. While I did find a suitable solution to this contradiction, this period of exploration (the *doing* of my thesis) forced me to see the messiness of thought, to accept that there are aspects of the academic experience that do not lie perfectly within one frame, theory or lens, and to grow as both a feminist and an asexual.

As a feminist researcher, I was interested in designing a project that brought silenced and unknown voices to the forefront. Harding and Norberg (2005, p. 2010) claim that "social values and interests can often block the growth of knowledge: sexist, racist, bourgeois, Eurocentric, and heterosexist ones certainly have". I wanted to pull back some of these social values to highlight the voices, the views, the experiences of the asexual community and my own voice as an asexual. I saw this community as one that had been silenced and in a state of invisibility.

Because of my emphasis on sexual politics, I was particularly interested in how asexuals located themselves within sexual discourse. As a member of the online communities, I knew that asexuals participated in intimate relationships but often framed them in ways that ran counter to the HPS. In some ways, I also wanted to see a more detailed space for sexual practices within asexual communities. I am not sure if this was a reaction to my somewhat radical position around sexual politics or if it was because of my position as an asexual who participated in sex, but either way, I had personal interests in designing a project that would provide at least an opportunity to explore the variation of intimate relationship practices and develop an asexual sexual discourse.

As a cyberfeminist inspired particularly by works from the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>16</sup> I have always been drawn to the connections between technology and the self, especially how one can be an extension of the other.<sup>17</sup> Here was a political identity and sexual orientation that took shape in online communities. My sense of self as an asexual has been informed by my online practices within these communities. As a community, we

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<sup>16</sup> I was particularly influenced by Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* and her later related works.

<sup>17</sup> I have dual interests here. I am interested in the changes of the body, the development of medicine and the implementation of new technologies to and onto/as part of the body. However, as it relates to my research, I am more interested in the online self as a possible cyborg. I see the online asexual communities as extensions of the self, given the relationship between the sexual orientation as an identity (especially for me) and the development, shifts and realisation of the identity online.

created a reality that is asexuality and have continued to inform, change and shape its meaning through our technological explorations as much as by our physical, day-to-day practices, if not more. I used my cyberfeminist position for examining asexuality as a concept and to inform my selection of methods, though I do not engage with these themes in my overall analysis. While there are some aspects of cyberfeminism that relate and would aid a deeper analysis, the views against essentialism were difficult to overlay with asexuals' sense of somewhat essentialist selves.

There were also specific feminist topics within the asexual communities that interested me. For example, I found presentations of gender intriguing: the variability in gender identity and its related sexual and/or romantic performance. There appears to be a significant number of asexuals who identify as some form of genderqueer, while still articulating or reproducing very heteronormative scripts<sup>18</sup>/practices. While I have always seen myself as cisgender<sup>19</sup>, there was a possibility here of a relationship between asexuality and genderqueer views that I wanted to explore.

My identity as an asexual is the reason I am composing this thesis in the first place. I am not an academic in the sense that I have no love for it, but I strongly admire those who live their lives as academics. However, I can do it. This is significant because I wanted a way to give back to the community that helped me when I was struggling. I wanted to find something that would be useful for spreading information and increasing visibility. This project, then, is not just a thesis; it is political activism designed to promote asexual awareness.

My identity as an asexual gave me access to asexual communities, it made me appear as an automatic ally to my participants—it was a very privileged position. I refer to privilege intentionally because there were many points throughout the thesis in which I had to ignore either my own asexual practices, or I had to challenge others' practices (or rather what was meant and happening within these practices). I had particular access (e.g. to participants, research) that others did not have and I sometimes relied on experiences that were quite different (e.g. my experience with sexual practices).

The combination of these sexual-asexual interests informed the backbone of my research: how do self-identified asexuals construct intimate relationships? My overall aim was to understand the complexity of the asexual intimate relationship(s) and its related practices. Throughout my analysis, this aim shifted to include more and more ideas around understandings of asexuality within the larger heteronormative framework.

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<sup>18</sup> I use “scripts” here to refer to the practices of scripts as outlined in Gagnon and Simon (2003).

<sup>19</sup> But a cisgender researcher in the field of Women's Studies.

Through my attempt to develop an asexual sexual discourse, I had to challenge the relationship between asexuality and heteronormativity. As my thesis developed, I even questioned: is asexuality an identity<sup>20</sup> at all?

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I present the project that I designed, stemming off my central aim. Because of my interest in the reported experience, I opted for a qualitative approach which involved surveying and interviewing my sample. Over the course of this chapter, I explain the structure of my qualitative research process and address the issues I faced. I begin with an explanation of my selected method and field. I then discuss my research sample, including my strategies for locating participants, key issues with my sample and bias. I follow with a presentation of the ethical considerations I faced and how I dealt with these issues. Finally I move into a discussion of the steps I took during analysis, challenges within my analysis process and offer a brief look at how I bridged theories to develop my analysis and deliver my own theory.

## *2.2 Typing out new research fields*

To find asexuals for my research and because of my cyberfeminism, I was interested in utilising the internet as my “field”.<sup>21</sup> There were two reasons that then justified my selection of online research methods: (1) according to polls on AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) and data from British national surveys (see Bogaert, 2004), asexuals constitute a small subject pool that is widely dispersed across the globe and (2) my specific area of research was potentially very sensitive. Drawing on Prause and Graham (2007), Brotto et al. (2010), Kim (2011), and Carrigan (2011), I chose to investigate asexuals’ intimate relationships using two means of data collection: online surveying and email interviews. I will discuss these methods in more detail later on in this section.

According to Bogaert (2004), 1% of the population is asexual.<sup>22</sup> This is suspected to be a slight under-representation of the actual number of asexuals globally,

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<sup>20</sup> Toward the end of my thesis, I suggest a framework in which asexuality could maintain itself as a social identity, but assess ways in which sexual orientations need no longer be the underpinnings for our identification[s] within intimate relationships.

<sup>21</sup> It was very interesting to reflexively examine my own “coming out [online]” narrative. I perceived my asexual identity to have been born online and moved (straddled?) to the non-virtual space. While exploring the relationship between the technological and the self is not a major aim of this research, using the internet as a field met a side aim of mine; it was slightly self-serving.

<sup>22</sup> This percentage was calculated based on a British National Survey and then generalised globally. Although problematic in that it does not account for cultural variations, general lack of visibility or different definitions among those who self-identify, it is still accepted as a close reflection of the expected global percentage.

but there is no dispute regarding the fact that the population of asexuals is still significantly small (see Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto et al., 2010). Given that my primary research aim was to gain an understanding of how self-identified asexuals construct intimate relationships, my sample was restricted to a subset of asexuals who had been in an intimate relationship of at least six continuous months. This meant that in order to get the number of participants I wanted to interview (30), I needed to find a way of bridging geographical barriers. The most efficient way appeared to be through online asexual communities. Further, because most research on asexuals utilised online research methods, this seemed to be an appropriate approach, and given that AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) has a large and diverse membership of mostly asexuals, this route of inquiry appeared apposite.

The second reason for selecting the internet as my research field was the need to create a safe environment for the potentially sensitive nature of my research topic. I was fortunate in that I was working with a population whose goals included increasing visibility and thus they were inclined to share very openly, but I had to be careful that I did not exploit my participants' willingness to confide in me. I used the internet platform to try to create a safer and more comfortable space for individuals to share. As long as I found ways to safeguard my participants' anonymity and assure their accessibility, the internet was the most advantageous route for collecting potentially sensitive material from a possibly vulnerable population. The means through which I protected my participants will be discussed later in this chapter.

Once my field was established, I had to decide how to best utilise the internet to address my research aims, and so I explored previous employment of the internet and its related methods in other work. Qualitative online research started to become prominent during the 1990s. At that time, the most common theme in research was exploring "deviant behaviour", such as individuals' attempts "to obtain child pornography from abroad, to contact youngsters to try to arrange meetings for sexual purposes, sometimes to misrepresent one's sexual identity" (Durkin and Bryant, 1995, p. 179). Since then, online research has increased exponentially. In their report on ethics in internet research, Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan emphasize how the internet is both a "tool" and a "(field) site for research" (2012, p. 3). The way the internet functions in research shapes the epistemological, theoretical and logistical positions of the researcher. Markham and Buchanan (2012, pp. 3-4) claim that there are seven primary forms of internet research inquiry: (1) utilization of the internet "to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys, archiving", (2) reports and/or studies about

“how people use and access the internet”, (3) studies that engage “data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets”, (4) studies on “software, code, and internet technologies”, (5) examinations of “the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements”, (6) research that uses “visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis [...] to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writing, and media forms”, and (7) studies on “large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet” by institutions. To target my primary research goal—to understand how asexuals construct intimate relationships—I selected the first form of internet research inquiry: utilizing the internet as a tool for data collection through the administration of an online survey and online interviews. I did consider a textual analysis of the online communities, but the forums strictly forbid such an analysis without permission from every participant.

Prior to selecting my online research methods, I had to consider and interrogate the methodological challenges this meant for my research. Internet research has created a methodological shift in the way we talk and think about the world, human behaviour and experience. New questions emerge about what constitutes human behaviour and interaction, about the relationship between the online self/selves and the offline self/selves and how the internet potentially serves as an ethnographic site for interactions between people and as a space that is acted within or upon. For example, when collecting data from individuals online, one of the primary areas of debate is the validity of the subject and finding ways to verify subjects’ identities. I would argue that researchers do not need to verify the offline self, but instead, as suggested by Hine (2005), approach both the online and offline selves as points of data. Hine (2005) suggests that online identities are valid in themselves: researchers do not have to verify that an individual’s identity is a “true” reflection of who they are as their online selves are also valid selves. When collecting accounts from individuals online about their offline selves, however, researchers instead need to consider that they are working with constructed narratives and identities which may or may not be connected to their online selves. James and Busher (2007, p. 109) argue that researchers need to consider the interaction “between the online and offline space” and selves. In my research, I was dealing with a population that was discussing their offline experiences via an online medium. However, because AVEN and similar online communities were where individuals came to understand and began to narrate their identities, it was possible that individuals were partly narrating their online constructions rather than their offline experiences. Yet, because the online space was where many individuals explored their



asexual selves and these stories began from an expression of reported offline experiences, the online self was inherently tied to the offline self. In summary, researchers' concern with verifying one's "real" or "offline" identity was not a methodological concern in my research on asexuals. Instead, I posit that asexual research online needs to see both the online self and offline self as relevant and understand in what ways they may or may not interact. Through my personal engagement with AVEN and my academic research around the structure of the community, I developed an understanding for how my participants' reported narratives can be influenced by these online communities and similar spaces. I relied primarily on what my participants said, but also challenged their understandings within my analysis using my familiarity with discussions and practices raised in the online communities where relevant.

James and Busher's (2007) work shows how traditional ways of doing research need to be adapted to incorporate the changing ways individuals come to understand and know themselves and their environment. The shifts James and Busher (2007) suggest questions if we need new ways of thinking about and comprehending knowledge and whether current theories, epistemologies and methods account for what is happening online, especially as researchers continue to apply "naturalistic approaches to online phenomena" (Hine, 2005, p. 7). Hine (2005) proposes a new type of perspective, which she calls "SCSSK", "the sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge perspective". This perspective envisions the internet in two ways: as a "cultural context and [a] cultural artefact" (Hine, 2005, p. 9). The notion of the internet as a "cultural context" developed from ethnographic studies. These studies recognised the "cultural richness" of the internet, but Hine (2005, p. 8) contends that in "claiming the method [internet research] as ethnographic an author is making a performance of a community". This latter point indicates that the internet is a cultural artefact—it represents the meanings we attach to it and through it, reflecting our situated positions at a given time. Therefore, the internet "means different things to different people, and they will see its functions, risks and opportunities in ways that reflect their own concerns" (Hine, 2005, p. 9).

When considering Hine (2005) and James and Busher (2007), I recognised that for my research I needed to address the construction of the internet as a particular cultural site for my participants and an artefact for my participants. Many of my participants were part of what they themselves refer to as an online community ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) and acknowledged that these communities influenced how they

came to and continue to understand their asexuality. Therefore, although I am collecting accounts of offline practices, the cultural context of the online space cannot be detached from my methodological process and analysis.

In order to collect my participants' offline experiences and collect demographics, I opted for two online research methods: online surveys and email interviews. I chose an online survey because it is an established and familiar practice in online research, it allows my participants to stay anonymous and it is an effective tool for collecting interview participants, which was the main method I wanted to execute. Using a survey meant I could collect understandings of asexuality and demographic trends from a larger sample than my interview sample. Computer-assisted surveys began in the 1980s and self-administered questionnaires followed a decade later, which were convenient for the way answers "are immediately stored in a computer database and ready for further processing" (Vehovar and Manfreda, 2008, pp. 177-178). The self-administration feature of online surveys makes it easy for participants to respond at their own pace, and I opted for no forced answers so participants were not required to finish all of the survey if they only wanted to comment on one part. A survey was helpful for gaining access to participants for online interviewing, while providing interested participants with an idea about what to expect in the interviews. Giving participants an idea about one's research structure prior to the interviews was a noted critical advantage to online research according to James and Busher (2006). James and Busher (2006) received feedback following their use of online interviewing, which suggested that individuals were more receptive to participating when they had a sense of the number of questions and/or the expected formatting for the section and subsequent sections of the research. I had no way of knowing if some potential participants were put off by the survey and would have been willing to participate in interviews had there not been a survey component.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, I did not explore if completing a survey influenced individuals' choice to participate in the interviews, but I did receive comments on the forum thread about how individuals were looking forward to the interviewing phase, suggesting that, at the very least, the survey functioned as a small motivation.

I did, however, find that running a survey established or had the potential to establish microlevels of power. Presser (2005) contends that there are different microlevel features within the research process that determine the power structure

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<sup>23</sup> If someone had been interested in the interviews but not the survey, I likely would have still rejected their participation as the survey data was essential to understanding how my participants defined their asexuality.

between the researcher and the participant. In particular, Presser (2005, p. 2069) discusses how “the ‘point’ of the interview is conveyed to subjects through apparently extraneous features of the study, such as the consent form”. The survey operated as an “extraneous feature”, allowing participants two forms of microlevel power: (1) a better sense of the research prior to committing and (2) a comfortable avenue to withdraw from further participation. While minor forms of power, I attempted to develop my research to enable my participants to feel as empowered as possible. It was my hypothesis that the more they felt empowered and as though they had control over the information and the survey/interview, the more they would divulge.

Because of personal experience, I selected SurveyMonkey.com to design and host my survey, and I agree with Gordon (2002, p. 85) who maintains that SurveyMonkey is advantageous for its ease of access and its ability to assist in the analysis and storage of data. The ability to import summaries into Microsoft Excel proved instrumental for my coding method and for easily transferring participant data without compromising the content. The website is free with a basic subscription, but because of the lack of a contractual agreement, I opted for the increased flexibility and options of the professional subscription and was in a financial position to pay for these higher levels of service. The professional subscription allowed me to have a wider selection of features and ask more than the 10-question limit that comes with basic subscriptions.

According to Best and Krueger (2008, p. 218) the first step to a successful survey is usability: “poor usability may decrease the response rate” or lead to “drop out”. I selected SurveyMonkey because of its successful usage across different types of hardware, but to be sure, I viewed my survey on both PC and Mac systems prior to administering it to participants. Best and Krueger (2008, p. 224) suggest being particularly mindful of text selection and to avoid symbols. Sometimes unique fonts, symbols, and pictures can display themselves differently depending on the browser used. I opted for simple formatting, choosing fonts like Times New Roman, Arial and Cambria for both titles and questions, given its popular use as standard text format and the unlikelihood that it might be incorrectly displayed on screen. The next step was choosing an adequate layout. If a survey is too long, it “may reduce response rates, may create needlessly high survey non-completion or roll-off, and may even increase measurement error” (Best and Krueger, 2008, p. 223). I divided my survey into three sections to reflect the three themes of my survey (demographics, asexual identity, and intimate relationships) and displayed only one section per page. This gave participants

the sense that the survey was short. Even with multiple pages, respondents tend to prefer knowing how much of the survey is left as they proceed, usually in the form of a percentage completion bar on each page.

Multiple pages are also helpful in protecting against roll-off—where participants begin surveys, but fail to complete them because of length—and allows some data to be saved from the completed pages (Best and Krueger, 2008, p. 223). My biggest concern initially was the length and wordiness of the first page due to the informed consent dimension. Mustanski (2001, p. 299) asserts that “long page[s] may seem confusing or overwhelming” and because my first page had little participant interaction and was heavy-content, I was concerned that individuals would feel disinterested in participating. However, these fears were largely unfounded given where I experienced roll-off and the rate at which I received responses, which I will discuss next.

I received the majority of my responses within the first 48 hours. Most of those who gave their consent were willing to fill out the first section on demographics (losing approximately 10 participants out of 96<sup>24</sup>). The second section required individuals to define asexuality and detail their experiences as they began to refer to themselves as asexual. These questions were more time-consuming and this may explain why I saw a drop from 86 to 68 completed surveys. If individuals were willing to answer those questions, they were likely to answer the next section. Only 9 individuals choose not to respond to the last section, but they clicked to continue to the end rather than exiting out entirely. It is unclear what prompted this behaviour, but it may relate to the sensitive nature of the third section (details of their intimate relationships).

Similarly, the only instance where participants did not fully complete a section was in the second section where individuals started to respond to the section but then stopped; it was not a selective refusal to answer a particular question(s). Each question was designed to have the option to leave it blank to give participants greater control over how to respond. Out of the 59 fully completed surveys, only one participant left a question blank, which was the participant’s sex, but they responded “female” to gender. It was difficult to assess if this was intentional or accidental, especially given that there was nothing atypical in her gender response.

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<sup>24</sup> I noted some incidences of repeated attempts at taking the survey given that participants did not have the option to save their responses and return. On two occasions, I had survey responses that were fairly duplicated, but one was incomplete. This suggested that some participants left the survey for whatever reason and returned at another time.

For my question formatting, I selected free response options to allow participants to more fully express their experience and/or identification. Riggle et al. (2005, p. 4) explain that “using open-ended rather than close-ended questions” can elicit “direct feedback from participants on their experiences”. For instance, when asking individuals about their gender, researchers have a tendency to limit the response to two or three options (male, female, other). If I had limited responses using a similar close-ended question formation, I would have lost the complexity of gender expression within my population and some of the detailed responses I received as people explained their gender identification (e.g., agender, but uses female pronouns; anti-binary) However, open-ended questions require “participants who can articulate their perceptions and observations”, which risked limiting my participant pool (Riggle et al., 2005, p. 4). In practice, people provided responses that were longer and more detailed than I initially expected.

Each section of the survey was carefully designed to minimise the length of time needed to complete it and moved from a broad focus to the specific. For the demographic section, I paid particular attention to limiting the amount of potentially identifiable information in order to protect the anonymity of my participants. The questions were limited to age, biological sex, gender, nationality, sexual and romantic orientations, and number of relationships that had lasted 6 continuous months or longer.<sup>25</sup> These questions were important for establishing if these demographic features played a role or related to the choices made in intimate relationships. The section on asexual identification allowed me to understand how my participants define asexuality and the role that identification plays in their articulation of self and social interactions. While not a direct aim of my study, this section allowed me to interrogate the current definitions of asexuality in academic research compared to the participants’ understanding(s). The section exploring intimate relationships gave me a brief insight into the reported basic structure of those relationships for asexuals and for each participant prior to the interview phase.

The survey was an opportunity to gain a basic overview of participants’ demographic information, their understandings of asexuality and of their intimate relationships. The survey was also used to collect participants for in-depth interviews.

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<sup>25</sup> One of the parameters I established for my participants is that they had to have been in a relationship that was 6 months or longer. The reasoning for this is discussed in my section on sampling later in this chapter.

Interviewing was selected to gain deeper insights<sup>26</sup> into participants' intimate relationships and to capture longer narratives in a process Sundrud (2011) calls "storytelling". Sundrud (2011, p. 4) highlights the importance of storytelling for asexuals, claiming that "narrative performances allow individuals to communicate their sexual identity and elicit meaning"; asexuality "has evolved into a social community". This suggests that it is critical for any research on asexuals to have a space for storytelling. I selected in-depth interviews because the format allowed me to ask open-ended questions that were broad enough to capture different types of stories.

In order to extract data that would be rich enough to answer my research questions and target a wide sample, I had to decide which type of online interviewing I was going to implement. Two formats were available: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous interviewing online takes place in a "chatroom-type [of] environment" or on a video tool such as skype (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 274). Most synchronous interviews are designed like face-to-face interviews where a time is allotted for the interview to take place. This format allows for "greater spontaneity" than asynchronous interviews, while still providing the geographic reach of online interviewing (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 274). These types of interactions can be perceived as being "more 'honest' in nature, as there is little time to consider the social desirability of the response" (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 275). While these advantages can be appealing, they carry many of the caveats of face-to-face interview and can be subject to technical interruptions. James and Busher (2006, p. 405), when explaining their decision not to do telephone interviews, argue that "the different time zones between participants and researcher would have made it difficult to agree a convenient time for conversations". This holds true for synchronous online interviews as well: the researcher can reach individuals from different geographical regions, but can find that time negotiation hinders the process, if it does not make it altogether impossible. Further, technical issues (e.g. internet cutting out) can have immediate impacts on synchronous interviews, which can potentially leave participants in a distressed and/or frustrated state. For my interviewing process I needed to be able to reach people from different time zones and those who might not have an internet connection that supports chat-room style messengers or video conferencing tools, which made asynchronous interviewing a more useful method for my approach.

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<sup>26</sup> Because of the complexity of intimate relationships, I relied almost entirely on the data from my interviews throughout the majority of my thesis. The survey results were necessary for the initial groundwork, but did not offer enough insight so as to make a thorough analysis and claim.

Asynchronous interviewing occurs over a span of time and, while still developed in the flow of a conversation, can easily take days, weeks or even months (James and Busher, 2009). Some researchers, such as O'Connor et al. (2008), classify asynchronous interviewing as something conducted in non-real time, but James and Busher (2009, p. 22) claim that asynchronous communication “creates a new concept of time that is neither linear nor punctual and provides hypertextual links to other texts”. I found that my participants occasionally included references to outside conversations or texts, usually in the form of links, to summarise conversations or to clarify the conversation we were having. For example, Cynthia often spoke of relationship anarchy (RA) and linked me to an RA manifesto (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andie-nordgren-the-short-instructional-manifesto-for-relationship-anarchy>) and Bryan suggested I read a thread on AVEN to better understand his view a lack of sexual attraction not equating to a lack of sexuality (<http://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/74463-lack-of-sexuality/>). Participants treated it as if they had told me the entire story or stories embedded within the link(s), carrying on the conversation as if I then had the knowledge of everything within that textual site.<sup>27</sup> Some online participants treated the conversations as an on-going process despite the time in-between responses while referring to or being influenced by participants' current situations. For instance, one of my participants ended her relationship in the time between e-mail correspondences, but opted to continue the interview and worded her responses as if she were still within the relationship as was the situation of the initial conversation.

I selected questions (see Appendix) that aided a chronological narrative and encouraged breadth in the responses. What surprised me was the way asynchronous [online] interviews can represent multiple instances of time. That is, I created an interview that was presented as a linear, uninterrupted flow, but called for narratives discussing the past (their interactions with their partner[s]). Then individuals sometimes referred to the spaces of time in-between the interviewing phases. The disruption of time made it difficult to contextualise the data and understand which “when” was influencing the constructed narrative.

The key advantage of asynchronous interviewing is that participants can spend time developing and deciding how to respond (though this may not always happen in

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<sup>27</sup> I also sometimes explored these topics further even if they were outside the scope of my research as (1) they were important to the participants' identities and (2) I received positive feedback from participants (e.g. “I would love to talk further...”) when discussing these topics. I viewed this as an opportunity to give them the position of “knowing” and empower them within the research.

practice). Email interviewing has the possibility to “create narratives that are enriched by the very fact that they represent the participants’ constructed lives, thinking and reflections of their experiences” (James and Busher, 2009, p. 26). Although I do not know if all participants took the time to think carefully about their responses, it was important that they had the opportunity to develop their narratives. Further, many of my participants were describing past experiences, which sometimes can be difficult to recall in spontaneous conversation, but an asynchronous format allows time for recall.

O’Connor et al. (2008, p. 272) claim that the “e-mail interview is arguably one of the simplest modes of online interaction”, especially as “individuals become increasingly techno-competent”. The most common form is through a type of email or messaging structure. The questions are distributed over the course of a few emails so that participants do not feel overwhelmed (O’Connor et al., 2008, p. 272). I sent three e-mails with questions to keep it minimal as O’Connor et al. (2008) suggest, including an introduction at the beginning of the first e-mail and a concluding e-mail after the third set of questions. This meant that questions were easy to display on a single shot of a [computer] screen.

To balance participants’ potential need for time and my own field work schedule, I asked participants to respond within seven days or to inform me if they needed more time. I found that my participants responded at varying intervals and it was unclear if they actually made use of the time allotted. Eight participants responded within 24 hours of receiving an e-mail from me. An additional five responded within 48 hours. Nine took an average of five to seven days while seven had to be contacted due to delay. While I informed participants that they had seven days, in practice I gave most participants two weeks to respond before inquiring if they still wished to continue. On occasion, I had a participant who noted that they would be away for a period of time and unable to respond. One participant (Aeron) said that ze was very cautious of hir language, which suggested that ze made some use of the extra time to respond. Two other participants (Orange and Sophia) sometimes sent additional responses after completing a section or at the end as they thought of something else that applied or if they wanted to clarify (unprompted) something they had already said.

The majority of the responses contained correct spelling and grammar, which may suggest that individuals edited their responses at some level. Participants also wrote extensive narratives. In fact, I was surprised by how long responses generally were, with ten pages being the average length of text once the e-mails for each respondent were combined and the longest was 24 pages, the shortest was 5 pages. The



shortest narratives were those written by individuals whose nationality suggested that English was not their first language and they often lacked richness. One was comprised of responses almost entirely in the form of lists.

### *2.3 Sample and sampling strategies*

In my first chapter, I discussed the emergence of online communities for asexuals. These are the largest populations to draw on, given the limited number of individuals globally who identify as asexual. AVEN, for instance, had over 87,500 members in December 2016.<sup>28</sup> While not all of those members are necessarily asexual, I assumed that the majority are and, thus, they form an ideal target population for research on asexuals. I reached out to two Facebook groups, requesting permission to post my call for participants in the event that I did not meet the number of participants I needed, but it was never necessary to contact these groups.<sup>29</sup>

Recruiting online from a space such as AVEN requires a negotiation of barriers that have yet to be clarified, particularly regarding what constitutes public and private space. It is unclear who has the right to the space and what the content on online spaces can be used for and with whose permission (James and Busher, 2009, pp. 56-57). The issue with seemingly public spaces such as chat rooms or discussion boards is that people may think they are speaking privately, and it can become unclear what information may be used for research and what not. It is also unclear if online participants are open to solicitation for research within these types of communities. These sites are often framed as spaces “for people to safely explored their closeted experiences and identities” (Jay, 2003, p. 2), which may mean utilising them for research can compromise those spaces. Because my research did not occur on AVEN or in response to AVEN, I was able to outline more clearly what text would be included and to respect the public/private spaces. Further, as a member of AVEN, as an asexual and because AVEN has an area on its forums for research purposes, I was able to post my research without disrupting the dynamics of the group, posting it only in the designated area once I had acquired permission from the forum moderators. Thus, for my recruitment, I utilised the section of AVEN forums dedicated to research and posted a link to my survey. It was possible that participants shared my link among individuals who fit the restrictions outside of AVEN, but I did nothing to encourage or restrict this

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<sup>28</sup> When I began my fieldwork in the spring of 2013, it had 53,000 registered members.

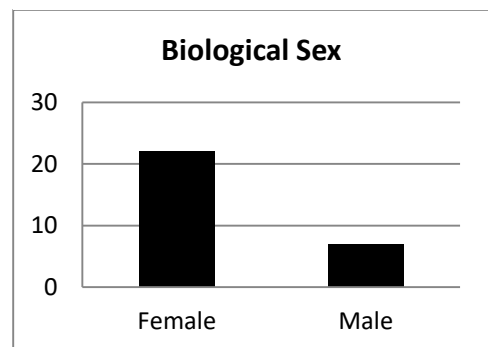
<sup>29</sup> If I were starting this research now, I would be inclined to call for participants in both spaces as Facebook continues to grow.

behaviour. At the conclusion of the survey, as mentioned previously, I had 68 completed surveys. This pool was then further limited to 37 who opted to participate in phase two (e-mail interviews). Of the 37, I had six non-responders and two who started the interviewing process, but for unknown reasons stopped participating, leaving me with 29 completed interviews.

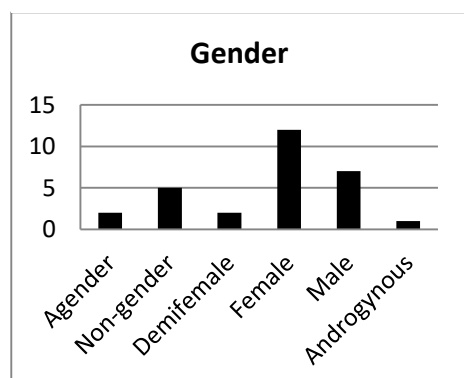
Throughout my research I maintained a reflexive stance regarding the fact that I drew participants predominantly from AVEN. With AVEN comes a risk of homogenous thinking despite heterogeneous demographics. This is because, as James and Busher (2009, p. 99) argue, “[e]ach space (community) has its own culture and rules of conduct that define [...] what the purposes and processes of it are. The cultural narratives of a community help to build its cohesion and identity”, and they help build the identity of their members. AVEN is designed to bring people together around the identity of asexuality and strives to determine and define what that identity entails. This means that my participants articulate their understandings of asexuality through a particular construction and I expected to see shared views regarding the definition and practice of asexuality. Instead I found quite varied thinking, which may be a function of my somewhat diverse pool of participants.

Of the 29 people I interviewed, 76% were female (n=22) and the rest were male (n=7; see Table 1). The gender breakdown was a bit more diverse. All the males identified as cisgender, whereas the females were distributed across different gender identities: agender (n=2), non-gender (n=5), demi-female (n=2), cisgender (n=12) and androgynous (n=1; see Table 2). It is unclear why this is, but it could relate to women being historically and culturally seen as the subordinate gender and these participants were attempting to claim a different role for themselves. Most of my participants were under the age of 30 (n=22) and aside from three people, all were 35 or under. This may relate to generational differences in exposure to technology. I expected half of my participants to be American, which was in fact the case (n=15), but I had other nationalities as well: British (n=1), Canadian (n=4), Chinese (n=2), Dutch

**Table 1: Biological Sex of Participants**  
Source: Interview data

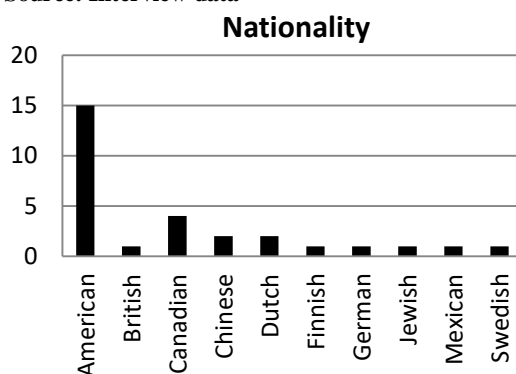


**Table 2: Gender of Participants**  
Source: Interview data



(n=2), Finnish (n=1), German (n=1), Mexican (n=1), Swedish (n=1) and one participant opted to mention their ethnic identity as Jewish (see Table 3). It is worth noting that some of these individuals were studying abroad at the time of the interview. For example, neither Chinese participant was in China at the time of the interview; both were in America. So although several nationalities were represented, it was difficult to assess which culture had promoted exposure to asexuality. It is also worth noting that one of my limitations for participants was a strong understanding of English<sup>30</sup>. Two participants appeared not to have strong English skills and this impacted one the quality of their data.

**Table 3: Nationality of Participants**  
Source: Interview data

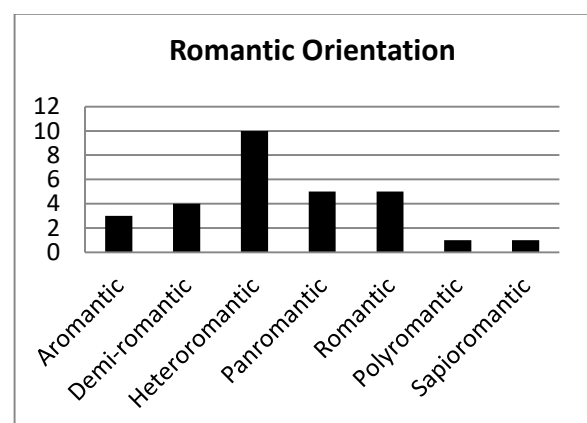


overly surprised by this. Five participants identified as panromantic, four identified as demi-romantic, three as aromantic and then one as both polyromantic and sapioromantic. Five individuals did not specify their romantic orientation, but did acknowledge that they were “romantic asexuals” (see Table 4). Interestingly, it was the three oldest participants who perceived themselves as this, which may suggest there is a slight generational difference in the way asexuals identify, but my sample was too small to be generalizable.

People were encouraged to participate only if they self-identified as asexuals, were 18 or older, were competent in English and had been in an intimate relationship for at least 6 months while identifying

For romantic orientation, I predicted the majority would be hetero- or homoromantic. I was surprised to see that I did not have a single person who identified as homoromantic. Ten participants did, however, define themselves as heteroromantic. Nine out of those ten individuals were also cisgender. Given a pattern of heteronormativity, I was not

**Table 4: Romantic Orientation of Participants**  
Source: Interview data



<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that I posted my call for participants on the English language version of the AVEN page. There are other AVEN forums in different languages. In limiting my sample to the English language version I may have lost a clearer understanding of how asexuality operates more internationally.

as asexual. The age restriction was to guarantee that all participants would be of an age equivalent to adult status for ethical approval of my research in the United Kingdom. The age restriction might unintentionally suggest that experiences correlate to age, but I do not want to suggest that that is necessarily true. Proficiency in English was important partly because of my limited ability to analyse data and the risk of data loss when translated, but more importantly because of variability in what is understood as asexuality. The language surrounding asexual identities emerged in the communities in the mid-2000s. One of the primary issues in asexuality studies is determining one's operational definitions. To alleviate some of this, I decided on this restriction and I selected free-response question formats to give significant space for communicating within this restriction. The restriction on minimal relationship length was to establish that the asexual had been in a relationship long enough to develop narratives and patterns of behaviour and to allow me to track those narratives through a bit of time. Brotto et al. (2010, p. 603) found that "among [their asexual participants] who were currently in a relationship, the relationship length was usually less than one year". This meant that my restriction had to be short enough to still attract participants.

The only questions that emerged about my parameters were around what I meant by an "intimate relationship". These questions were asked on the forum where I initially posted my survey. I responded to them, saying:

I have intentionally left it a bit ambiguous. I did not want to suggest there was an appropriate type of intimate relationship. Essentially, if the relationship went on for more than 6 months and was intimate according to what you personally would define as intimate, then you can complete my survey (and participate in part 2 if you so choose). This could potentially include QPRs,<sup>31</sup> virtual relationships, etc.

This was well-received within the forums and I saw an immediate increase in participants.

There was less concern regarding my other parameters, but I found some ignored them and participated despite not meeting them. The first issue was seen around competency in English. It was clear from their responses when individuals were held back due to language abilities. Their surveys and interviews were the shortest. They

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<sup>31</sup> "QPR" refers to "queer platonic relationships".

lacked detail and often relayed more of the facts of a situation than the sentiment behind the interaction or there was a tendency to respond in list or short-hand form. These were often characterised by a high number of grammatical and spelling errors. The other issue was around individuals being in a relationship for six months while identifying as asexual. Several participants had not known at the time of their intimate relationship(s) that they were asexual, but the majority of these people explained that they had always “felt asexual”, they “just didn’t know what to call it”. I opted to keep these surveys as they helped contextualise some of the experiences asexuals described within intimate relationships prior to discovering asexuality and because the participants thought their [unnamed] identity had a significant impact on their experience(s). I only interviewed one individual from this group, and this was partly because ze was in an intimate relationship where ze identified as asexual for four months at the time of the survey.

There are two primary issues in my sampling that I want to address: generalisation and selection bias. The internet provides convenient samples, but makes it difficult to assess how representative the data is of the general population and whether it can be generalised. Mustanski (2001, p. 294) argues that this is largely dependent on the “recruitment methodology utilized”. Each social media network, website, discussion group, online game, etc. is geared toward a particular population. For instance, if researchers recruit from a chat room that is titled something like “Men4BBB”, it is up to the researcher to know the meaning of those abbreviations and recognise that participants from that chatroom will have a particular type of view that may not be representative of a more general population. It can therefore be normally best for researchers to recruit across several different mediums to reach a wider sample of their target population or, if not, to be clear about who their results and findings represent.

The question for researchers studying asexuality is whether data pulled from AVEN can be generalised more widely across asexuals outside this population and to what level it needs to be generalizable. My participant pool consisted predominantly of young people, female-bodied, from the United States and Anglophones. While I attempt to grapple with the overlap between gender and asexuality in this thesis, it is unclear what role their other identities play and thus to what extent the research can be generalised to other asexuals. Chasin (2011, p. 715) argues that a sample “would need to be comprised of various representative sub-samples of asexual people” in order to generalise. However, there is an additional difficulty within asexuality in that it consists of many subsets. Chasin (2011) claims the diversity that comes under the umbrella term “asexual”, specifically the different forms of romantic attraction (homoromantic,

aromantic, panromantic, etc.) and varying levels of asexuality (demi-, grey-, etc.). If a researcher's goal is to theorise across asexuality, then a generalisation needs to at least reflect these points of difference that occur within the expression of this sexual orientation/identity. Within my research, I intentionally excluded demi-sexuals and grey-asexuals although these individuals often self-identify within asexuality<sup>32</sup>. I also recognise that my participant pool lacked certain romantic orientations (e.g. homoromantic).

Yule (2011, p. 11) claims that there is an overreliance and oversampling of asexuals online. Much like most current research on asexuality (Yule, 2011; Brotto et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2008; Prause and Graham, 2007), I used AVEN to recruit my participants and I used internet research methods despite being aware of how this potentially limited my sampling pool given that access to the internet is still limited (Vehovar and Manfreda, 2008, p. 181). As Yule (2011) noted, this is becoming increasingly recognised and can be very problematic. I considered using other social media sources, such as LiveJournal and Facebook, but there were verbalised connections to AVEN in these communities as well. They also presented new challenges to anonymity and my ability to solicit participants from their space. While I recognise the frequent use of AVEN for research on asexuality, asexuality's visibility is still strongly connected to its online presence and especially to AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). Until research grows and visibility increases in a way that individuals are arriving at asexuality outside of the context of online interactions, I promote the continued use of AVEN as an online recruitment pool. Even when researchers attempt to expand their search beyond AVEN, they still find the majority are also on AVEN (see Yule, 2011).

#### *2.4 Ethical considerations: Under-represented populations, security and costs*

While I mentioned previously how I implemented a feminist stance to construct a power balance between my participants and me, I had several other ethical considerations and research challenges. The key ethical issues I faced were (1) working with under-represented populations and gaining their informed consent, (2) security risks and (3) social and economic costs to both participants and myself.

Although the internet functions as a potentially safe space and easier avenue for researching sensitive topics (Bampton and Cowton, 2002), researchers need to have

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<sup>32</sup> "Asexuality" in some online communities, especially on Facebook, is becoming an umbrella term for any variability in diminished sexual attraction.

measures in place should participants require further support or become distressed. Because my research discusses potentially sensitive content regarding participants' intimate relationships, I established several safeguards to handle the sensitivity. AVEN already has an established practice for providing support. If participants were distressed at any point, they were aware of the potential support that this group could provide. I chose not to hide my identity from my participants in order to provide a sense of commonality, but at the same time, I chose not to disclose this information at the start of my project<sup>33</sup> so that others did not feel pressured to reciprocate in ways that I potentially would. In the end, no one asked me to clarify my identity. Individuals were, however, able to view my AVEN profile which states my sexual orientation. Prior to the research, I limited the content I displayed about myself, choosing to remove content related to my views on intimate relationships and instead detailed my role as a researcher and my identity as an asexual. Because one's profile refers to forum activity, I reviewed my posts and deleted or modified when needed. During the first four days of my research, my profile view count went from 163 to 384, which suggests that at least some of the participants were aware of my status as an asexual. This was sometimes reflected in the interactions when individuals suggested I knew things about the community, such as the complexity of the asexual spectrum.

In order to further protect my participants, I needed to clearly articulate the aims of my research. This is normally done through informed consent, but I found that informed consent operated somewhat differently online and actually risked my participants not being fully informed. Eynon et al. (2008, p. 27) argue that concepts like informed consent are "cast into uncertainty when it comes to research online"; people often do not fully read consent forms and there is a question as to whether "clicking" equates to consenting. Researchers need to ensure that their consent forms clarify what content may or may not be included in the research. My consent form and agreement to participate form (see Appendix) emphasised the sensitivity of the information I was collecting. While the forms should clarify project aims, risks of participation, participant limitations, and contact information, online research consent forms should include additional information that accounts for the additional risks and/or manages expectations of online research, such as risks to virtual selves (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 282). It was particularly important to clarify when research crossed between perceived public/private spaces. For instance, all of my participants were members of AVEN and

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<sup>33</sup> The start of my project refers to both when I posted on AVEN forums and when I introduced a new research method.

had interacted on the forums who perhaps had particular friends who knew them in their virtual context, maybe had shared private details within that space. The problem in my research arose when individuals sometimes referred to their AVEN identities, conversations on AVEN or actions/interactions on AVEN. This meant that their rather personal stories were being connected with fairly public identities. I occasionally had to refer back to sections to emphasise to my participants the ways they were sharing [virtually] identifiable information. I attempted to mitigate the risk by suggesting to participants that they select non-identifiable information, but I found in practice that these messages were largely not taken on board. I am unsure if the problem was in my failure to emphasise in the forms the way their references to online interactions made them identifiable or if participants were simply ignoring the content in the forms.<sup>34 35</sup>

Consent forms should clarify how data will be stored, used, and protected. My greatest security concern was online security. I used these forms to inform participants how to better protect their information online. Online informed consent is given in one of two ways: through an email attachment or through clicking a tick box on a survey. I opted for a tick box to safeguard my participants' identities. O'Connor et al. (2008, p. 283) argue that "the roles of the participants and any potential risks[,] should be provided" either as part of the first page of a survey, through a website bulletin, or email. I followed O'Connor et al.'s (2008) suggestion and used the first page of my survey to collect consent. I reiterated what clicking "agree" meant, referring back to the information I had provided and restating my participant parameters. Because I wanted to maintain the anonymity of my participants, I needed to find electronic means of dealing with providing information and receiving clear consent back from participants. I avoided email attachments because (1) I did not want participants to forego their identities, (2) I did not wish to risk viruses/malware, (3) some individuals find re-attaching documents time-consuming and/or they are not technologically knowledgeable, and (4) it would have been a more time-consuming process for both the participants and myself. Instead, I provided my e-mail in the consent form and encouraged participants to contact me if they had any questions. However, it was unclear how often participants would raise questions if they were uncertain given that

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<sup>34</sup> It is possible that with the removal of the social pressure of the researcher in a position of onlooker, individuals bypass the informed consent, selecting to proceed without processing the information and actually providing consent.

<sup>35</sup> During the interview process, one participant referred to herself using her real name. She was not concerned with me knowing her real name, but I repeated that I would replace that information with her pseudonym during my analysis.



the researcher does not appear as readily available online as he/she might be in a face-to-face interaction.

Part of creating a space for individuals to discuss sensitive topics also involved developing a plan to protect the security of both participants and myself online. The anonymity of the internet often means that individuals can protect themselves using pseudonyms/avatars. Researchers never have to know any identifiable material, whether demographic or physical and my own research limited identifiable material to demographic information. I minimised risks with the following tools and strategies: using a secure network(s); permanently deleting information at the conclusion of correspondence and asking participants to do so as well; and ensuring the data collected were stored securely so that they were only used and accessed by myself for the research and subsequent publications.

The security risks of online research and data protection are sometimes overlooked. For instance, many academic researchers are not aware of administrators' ability to access their stored data if it is backed up on university computers (although it is unlikely they will do so). The assumed safety of servers and online spaces makes it difficult to realise how and when researchers are not protecting their participants. Eynon et al. (2008, p. 27) argue that in "online research it is more difficult to assess the risk of participants coming to harm [...] and it is harder to judge individuals' reactions to the research". James and Busher (2009, p. 67) highlight how "records of participants' online conversations, even if carefully processed, can make participants' views instantly visible" if "their email addresses contain" identifiable material. I encouraged participants to choose or create an email that was secure, did not contain identifiable information and to remove any signatures within the body of correspondence. Some researchers use avatar names or pseudonyms as they are listed on forums or in chat room conversations. Although these do not appear to the researcher as identifiable material, I requested participants to create new pseudonyms. It was possible that members within communities like AVEN were aware of the personal information of their peers and, thus, anonymity and security could potentially be lost. It is the role of the researcher to protect these virtual identities as they are often extensions of or alternative forms of participants' "selves".

Researchers should also "identify themselves and their purposes when they begin their studies" to maintain a safe environment for participants and themselves (James and Busher, 2009, p. 62). Some researchers will "lurk" in online spaces, known or unknown to participants. Lurking can be seen as unacceptable behaviour and lead to

a loss of trust from participants, but it can be useful for a researcher to gain a better sense of the community before going forward with the research. As an insider, I had access to these communities and was able to interact more naturally along the premise of my position and shared interests in the forum topics prior to the start of my study without risking the trust of my participants. I did not use my membership to exploit the community discussions. I did put myself in a vulnerable position, however: I made myself readily available for contact, providing my university email address for my research project as well as my AVEN username, compromising my own online identity. I was and still am at risk of unwanted contact and have safeguards in place should I need them. I was aware of the ways I could report unwanted contact, such as blocking individuals on social media networks, and I was aware of how to report unwanted email contact. I had a support network in place if I faced any rejection or issues within AVEN.

Initially I intended only to provide my university e-mail and considered creating a new forum identity strictly for the research, but this diminished the ease with which individuals could contact me and meant I lost some of the exposure I had as a forum participant.<sup>36</sup> During the course of the research, however, if questions were posed, they occurred on the forum thread where I called for participants. I did have one participant contact me via AVEN. The individual<sup>37</sup> did not contact me stating ze had participated, but were looking to chat. Later I realised his details matched one of my participants. Because I did not want the communication to sway my interpretation of his responses, I politely disengaged from the communication and limited my participation on AVEN to my role as researcher.

Online researching introduced new ethical considerations regarding social and economic costs. As a feminist researcher, I was very conscious of both my position as a privileged student with secure access to the internet and my participants' positions within communities, homes or institutions that similarly reflected a particular social capital. As a researcher, however, I had to consider the cost alternative: an offline research project would have had too high of an economic cost. Bearing this in mind, I carefully thought about the cost dimensions related to my research and outline them below, including what decisions I made.

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<sup>36</sup> Beside individuals' names on a forum, there is a counter that states how many times they have posted and awards individuals titles the more they post. Researchers who had a more established identity were better received on AVEN than those who did not.

<sup>37</sup> This participant later stopped responding during the e-mail interview phase. It is unclear if ceasing conversation on AVEN was the cause.

Hine (2005, p. 3) emphasises how the internet is highly efficient in terms of costs, especially regarding the breadth of geographic reach, while potentially minimizing the costs to the researcher and participants. However, cost is a complicated issue. It can be more economical for researchers to use the internet as a tool or site for research—neither the researcher(s) nor the participants have to worry about travel expenses and it alleviates most, if not all, of their expenses for printing, mailing and transcribing as the normally already typed information can be stored [and encrypted] on [secure] computers and, if needed, backed up onto hard drives or flash drives. Universities sometimes cover these types of costs for academic researchers, further alleviating the economic expenses of their research. As a university PhD candidate, I was assigned an office space with a secure networked computer. As a largely self-funded research student, I covered any additional costs that arose during my research, which were limited to my expenses for hosting my survey (\$19.95/month). If I had used a less secure computer, I would have had the option to purchase software to protect my data, but several security software providers are starting to offer free programs available for download online.

When analysing the cost-effectiveness of online studies, these advantages generally get put forth, but there is a lack of a conversation regarding the availability and cost of the internet itself. For instance, while I [seemingly] only had the expense of hosting my survey online, my research becomes more expensive when I consider the actual costs of the secure, networked computer and my attendance at university where I essentially pay for the secure server I am then able to employ. My participants experience these same costs. Although it is more common and more affordable to have a computer in the home or nearby access, it is still possible that a selection bias occurs when doing online research. Researchers need to keep in mind who is actually able to participate and what that might mean for their research. For instance, Mustanski (2001) interviewed LGBT students from a university campus. These students had easy access to facilities, whether personal or university-provided, to participate in his study: they were in an economic position to participate. It is reasonable to suggest that any online research is severely limited in its sample by similar expenses.

The time efficiency of internet research, however, also has symbolic costs. Internet research can prove to be more cost-effective for researchers and participants than face-to-face interactions. That is largely due to ease of use. For researchers, there is no need to allocate funds for travel expenses or strict scheduled time for face-to-face interviews. Participants, similarly, find they can pace their time and the research as they

would like. Mustanski (2001, p. 293) explains that “participants conduct the study on [...a] computer whenever they desire”, and because of that freedom, participants can pace the research as it suits them. Participants can only benefit, however, when the research design is such that it is easy for them to follow and understand. Best and Krueger (2008, pp. 217-218) explain that “[b]ecause the Internet consists of a network of diverse networks, and does not require uniform hardware, software, or platforms, the presentation of a data collection instrument may appear differently to users”. If researchers ensure that the method of data collection can be viewed/used uniformly across different platforms and minimise technological disruption and/or interference through the research process, then participants will see a maximisation of their time efficiency. The methods I used to simplify my interviewing process and ensure time efficiency were discussed earlier in this chapter.

### *2.5 Further research challenges*

Earlier in this chapter I discussed how using online research methods introduced new methodological challenges. It also introduced new issues with already present research challenges, which I partly discussed in section 2.4 with details of how older issues, such as the researcher’s and participants’ security takes shape in new ways. I encountered additional research challenges that resulted from my method of e-mail interview where I confronted traditional issues in new ways. I found that the structure of the e-mail interview had to address three issues: establishing credibility and validity, building trust/rapport and issues of silence. Credibility needs to be established on both the side of the researcher and participant. In the faceless world of online interviewing, researchers have to over-rely on words and the trust of their participants to verify/believe their identities. To develop credibility, I clearly provided my personal information and the university I worked at. I contacted participants through my university e-mail to maintain and validate my position as an academic researcher. However, there was very little I could do to authenticate my participants. While I will discuss this further in the next section, I decided to limit my recruitment to a community discussion forum. Although non-members can publicly access all areas of the forum, generally it is members who access the announcement section my call for participants was posted under ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). This reassured me that my participants were likely members of AVEN who had already taken the time to engage in the community and, thus, were potentially invested in the visibility goals of both the community and my project. In the absence of verbal and physical cues, I had to examine linguistic

patterns to verify the maintenance of an identity. I relied on patterns in individuals' communication such as story-telling patterns. Further, I did not notice any instances of "fake" participants. Everyone who completed the survey and interview phase answered realistically as far as I could assess.

Once I had credibility, I tried to build on that to develop rapport. Because of the asynchronous interview style I selected, it was difficult to establish rapport. I decided on three tactics. The first was a form of cultural immersion where I made a greater attempt to take part in the asexual community and explored the resources individuals discussed within the community and during the interview process. The second tactic I used to develop rapport was participant agency during the research process. Third, I adjusted my questions to reflect what I knew about the participant (e.g. noting current state of intimate relationship, number of partners, adjusting pronouns). Each of these will be discussed below.

James and Busher (2009, p. 24) claim that the "informality of online communication can facilitate a closer connection with participants' feelings and values", but James and Busher (2009) overvalue high levels of disclosure and fail to address the researcher's [in]ability to properly recognize or understand the feelings of participants through text-based communication. For instance, a participant might respond in complete capitalization. In some instances, this can be misinterpreted as anger or emphasis, but it could be the way that individual communicates or a simple typing error. James and Busher (2009) do, however, provide guidelines to develop rapport with participants and better understand the feelings being communicated online, particularly in terms of cultural immersion. The first step is that the researcher "must be familiar with the common language used by the participants, including jargon, abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons and common grammatical rules" (James and Busher, 2009, p. 65). As a member of AVEN and a self-identified asexual, I was familiar with the language, jargon and abbreviations used on that site, but had to constantly stay mindful of the varying emoticons and emerging narratives without sacrificing my credibility as a researcher. Throughout my fieldwork phase, I participated more widely within the asexual community in order to better contextualise the research I had collected. However, I found that being an insider and the necessity of being familiar with the common language was less relevant to my population than I expected and did not exactly help me build rapport. As mentioned previously, my participants frequently linked me to information within the community and/or gave detailed accounts of their position/identity in given situations.

There were times when my familiarity with the community actually risked my data because I assumed knowledge or experiences and overused my relatability, diminishing the quality of the detail of some participants' responses. Chavez (2008, p. 485), when researching as an insider, similarly encountered assumed knowledge and/or assumed familiarity from her participants: "You know what I mean" or "You know how it is". I was inclined to accept these phrases from my participants, thinking that I did in fact know what they meant and attempting to exploit the seeming commonality to build a stronger connection, but I then risked misquoting or misrepresenting their views. Normally I recognised when I had made this error and followed up with e-mails to extrapolate further. Initially I was concerned that this would break rapport as it risked me coming across from a position of not being able to relate despite being an insider, but instead I found that the participants appreciated that I wanted to represent their positions clearly.

James and Busher (2009, p. 104) explain that the second step for developing trust "is closely related to a sense of ownership of a research project". I designed the research so that participants were known through a pseudonym from the beginning of the study. I asked them to choose their own name so that they felt a sense of empowerment within the research process and provided them with a role in the research. Participants' narratives constitute my data, which for some can be a very difficult and sometimes disempowering experience as they lose "control over their production" (James and Busher, 2009, p. 88). Allowing participants to choose their names was a very small attempt to let them be involved in the development of the research.

I received little feedback on whether participants appreciated choosing their pseudonyms. Unlike Dearnley (2005, p. 23) who had a participant who chose the pseudonym "Sporty Spice" and felt this took away from the academic nature of the work, I did not think any of my participants' pseudonyms were inappropriate. In general, individuals chose pseudonyms within one of five categories: initials (e.g. ADP), words (e.g. Heart), sci-fi related (e.g. Khalessi), gender-neutral names (e.g. Sam) and gender/sex-specific names (e.g. Bryan; see TABLE 5). There was no clear correlation between a person's name selection and how they self-identified. I was

**Table 5: Participant's Pseudonyms**

<b>Initials</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Sci-fi</b>	<b>Gender Neutral</b>	<b>Sex specific</b>
1. ADP (N)	1. Heart (DF)	1. Krakov (F)	1. Aeron (A)	1. Bryan (M)
2. CAF (F)	2. Orange (F)	2. Xaida (F)	2. Alex (F)	2. Cynthia (N/F)

- |              |                  |                     |                 |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 3. CS (M)    | 3. Platypus (M)  | 3. Cavi (M)         | 3. Dora (DF)    |
| 4. Ea (N)    | 4. Puppy (F)     | 4. Kippa (F)        | 4. Katya (A)    |
| 5. K[ay] (F) | 5. Ghost (M)     | 5. Sam (F)          | 5. Mel (F)      |
|              | 6. Suedonimh (A) | 6. Shry (M)         | 6. Michelle (F) |
|              |                  | 7. Robin Winter (M) | 7. Sophia (F)   |
|              |                  |                     | 8. Tori (F)     |
|              |                  |                     | 9. Geeske (F)   |

**Source: Interview data**

anticipating agender, non-gender, genderqueer and demi-identified participants to intentionally choose gender-neutral names, but of those I interviewed, only one genderqueer individual chose a gender-neutral name, two chose sex-specific names, two chose words, two chose initials and none chose sci-fi characters. On two occasions individuals changed their pseudonym and in both cases, the names fell under different categories. “Tori” initially was “Maxwell’s Demon”<sup>38</sup> until she noted my surname. This slip-up was useful for understanding why she chose the pseudonym she did: she explained it was a subject of interest to her. I expected individuals to choose pseudonyms that reflected their own asexual identities, but Tori’s selection process suggested that little could be assumed of the names people chose. Sometimes a name appeared relevant to a participant’s narrative or the way they told their narrative. For instance, the pseudonym “Puppy” appears more significant when you understand that the person in question met her partner for the first time in person when working with dogs. “Orange” used her pseudonym as a way of telling her narrative and symbolising the personalities of her partners as well as herself: “Pink – as the pseudonym suggests, I found Pink aesthetically attractive”, “Red, as the name suggests, has a strong, independent personality” and “Gold – the most handsome man I have ever seen, with a heart of gold”. The pseudonyms then operated in a symbolic form or as a narrative tool, but throughout the research itself, did not particularly lend themselves to building rapport. In fact, many participants used e-mails that either had identifiable names in the e-mail or in the signature section at the bottom of their e-mails, often not signing it with their pseudonym. For example, Xaida even referred to herself by her real name within her narrative. Given the widespread disuse and the lack of correlation between individuals’ name selection and the identities they presented to me, I found allowing participant pseudonym selection to be inconclusive in terms of developing rapport and in empowering participants.

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<sup>38</sup> “Maxwell’s Demon” is a concept created by physicist James Clerk Maxwell to challenge the second law of thermodynamics.

My third tactic for building rapport was adjusting questions/comments so that they reflected information the participant had already relayed. As interview participants had filled in a survey, I used the information collected from there to modify my questions. For example, in section one I asked participants in what ways they found their partner attractive/appealing. If a participant had mentioned having ongoing multiple partners or prior partners, I would adjust the question to specify “partners” or add “including your previous partners”. Occasionally in section two, when asking about which intimate behaviours individuals had engaged in, I would cite any discussed already in their survey responses. I found this process extremely lengthy and tedious. Each time I sent a set of questions, I spent at least an hour reviewing the participant’s information and previous responses. However, I also found that this process was well-received. Platypus (male, male, 31, American), for instance, stated: “I actually really like that these questions are really personalized”. Others commented on how it made the experience more enjoyable, made me more approachable and/or the attention to detail put them at ease.

I added to this by giving participants an opportunity to provide additional comments/feedback both during and at the conclusion of the interview process. I stayed open to suggestions or modifications. For example, many of my participants struggled with my question on how their performance of (a)sexuality had changed. I received multiple messages for clarification and decided to omit this question, especially given that the responses I had received did not add extra value and the question was already being answered through other responses and/or through the survey responses. At the end of the interview, each participant was messaged a concluding statement with an opportunity to comment. Most participants did not have any additional comments or questions. Some chose the chance to add final clarifications and to thank me for my work. Geeske (female, female, 33, Dutch) particularly noted an appreciation for the lack of focus on mental health topics and that she believed I was not prejudiced.<sup>39</sup>

The level of honesty and disclosure, especially when discussing sensitive topics, is strongly dependent on how secure the participants feel in the interviewing environment. One of the primary ways to ensure participant security is the maintenance of anonymity (James and Busher, 2009, p. 88). As previously mentioned, participants chose a pseudonym for the duration of the study, which was how I made sure they

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<sup>39</sup> Despite the movement away from pathologising asexuality in medical fields (as discussed in chapter 1), many researchers still explore the topic of mental illness which can put some participants into a state of distress.



stayed anonymous. They were encouraged to select a name that did not reflect their real [nor virtual] identity. Those opting to participate in the email interviews were asked to give an unidentifiable email address that protected their security insofar as they wanted it protected, which, as mentioned, was rarely the case. If a participant used an email with portions that suggested their identity, I reconfirmed that it would in no way be referred to throughout my study. I reminded them that there was still the potential risk if the email system was ever compromised, especially if they were not using a major email service (Gmail, Hotmail, etc.) and asked all participants to permanently delete the correspondence at the conclusion of the interviews.

A major dilemma for online asynchronous research is silence. James and Busher (2009, p. 24) explain that emails “can allow for an extended and deliberate sequence of events and for researchers and participants to digest messages before replying”. There comes a point in the research, however, when that time “to digest” exceeds a few days, and it is unclear if the silence means a participant is withdrawing from the research. Researchers have to decide how much time to give participants before contacting them with a reminder, and the “right” amount of time is “not universally agreed” upon (James and Busher, 2009, p. 42). There is also the question of how many reminder messages should be sent before assuming the participant has withdrawn (James and Busher, 2006; 2007; 2009). O’Connor et al. (2008, p. 282) suggest that researchers have to read “silences” and remain consistent in their approach throughout the research. In practice, that approach is not always successful. I informed my participants that they would have a week to respond before I would contact them, which is more than the three days James and Busher (2009) used for their research. I did not want to take away from their time to develop thoughtful responses, but I also had to create a responsible time structure for my fieldwork. However, there were instances when a participant had an unforeseen event in their life and wanted to delay the study for a few weeks. For example, one of my participants was quite ill and was in hospital. Another was in the process of relocating. Two were busy with university exams. In those instances, if I did not hear from a participant after the given time, I sent a polite follow-up message asking if the participant was now available and if ze still wanted to participate. As my research was happening more quickly than I scheduled, I was able to accommodate these individuals.

I, however, did not know how long to make my own silence. I struggled to decide if it was best to respond as soon as I got a response or to give the message a day or two. I tried to mirror my participants’ habits. If a person took more than a day to

respond, I usually waited an additional day and tried to respond no later than that. If an individual responded immediately, I too responded as quickly as possible.

## *2.6 Playing with words: Thematic analysis and bridging theories*

Because I collected data via two methods, my analysis process began at two different stages. In section 2.5, I discussed how I initially used the survey responses to adapt my interview questions. I also used the data to verify that my interview participants met my participant parameters. While I waited for my interviews to finish, I reviewed literature on different types of relationships I was aware of within the asexual community (e.g. queer platonic relationship, polyamorous relationships, aromantic). I compiled the demographic data to check for any patterns among my sample. I also noted repeated themes or topics. For example, almost all of my participants who completed the survey discussed masturbation when asked about socially conceived sexual behaviours that they did not perceive as sexual. Many of my participants mentioned AVEN when they responded to questions about where they had heard about asexuality. These early trends provided the initial grounds for my later coding of the interviews.

Once I had collected all of my interview responses, I then put the survey responses and interview responses onto Atlas.ti to code. I opted to use thematic analysis to sift through my data. James and Busher (2009, p. 11) argue that “if researchers are to understand life online, they have to understand that participants’ experiences are connected and shaped by cultural and social elements that are both real and virtual, public and private and online and offline.” A methodology for online research, then, has to bridge these dimensions and reflect on their impact on the data that emerges. While my research was not interested in behaviours online, in my study of asexuality I could not ignore the fact that what is understood as an intimate relationship is influenced by sexual normativity and what is understood as asexual largely comes out of online interactions in communities such as AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org); Scherrer, 2008).

Doing thematic analysis requires researchers to make a series of conscious decisions: (1) what counts as a theme; (2) inductive or deductive analysis; and (3) semantic or latent themes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) claim that a “theme captures something important about data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set”. A theme, then, is not necessarily determined by its frequency. In my research, I did not expect themes to be relevant across my entire data set given the variability typical of intimate relationships

and (a)sexual practices. When selecting themes for data analysis I first considered a general narrative of an intimate-relationship's trajectory: (1) how did they meet, (2) what happened after meeting, (3) positive and negative experiences within the relationship, and (4) how did it end if it did. Within each of these dimensions, I looked for repeated statements, experiences, attitudes and behaviours. For example, there was a high frequency of one of two possible scenarios when individuals met: partners were aware of the asexual's orientation or neither were aware of the asexual's orientation. Then within each of these there were similarities among responders such as a common trend for those who started to identify as asexual while in an intimate relationship to face a period of re-evaluation of their relationship goals and role within their relationship. These patterns emerged into workable codes (e.g. "asexual transition").

Deciding between an inductive approach and a theoretical perspective was difficult. An inductive approach is a bottom-up approach where themes are developed from the data itself. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83) claim that themes "may bear little relation to the questions that were asked of the participants" and coding happens largely without a pre-existing frame. On the other hand, a theoretical perspective "would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven", with less of a rich view of the data overall, but more "detailed analysis of some aspect of the data". Coding in this case reflects the questions asked (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). In my research, I did not want to restrict themes from a theoretical perspective when focusing on my research questions. However, I could not deny that my questions were designed to inquire after particular asexual experiences that reflected my own experiences and position as an asexual and feminist researcher. As an asexual who through most of the research was in an intimate relationship, I came into this project with my experiences that may have unknowingly guided my attention toward certain themes. I sometimes found I guided questions to further explore behaviours, especially as they related to gender performance, and read for this occurrence when coding, but overall, I attempted to maintain an inductive approach.

I decided to categorise both semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes are "explicit, meaning is on the surface and there's nothing beyond what is being said", which means "analysis consists of creating a description followed with an interpretation" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The majority of my themes were identified semantically, but I did not resist latent themes. Latent themes look for "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are

theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). For example, some of my participants when asked what behaviours, romantic or otherwise, they participated in primarily reported physical interactions, particularly sexual behaviours or drew attention to the lack of specific behaviours. Some participants even reported that they did not participate in any behaviours at all. I initially coded these behaviours together as “sexually-focused definition” to highlight this pattern of assumption. In later exchanges, I clarified the question to note that I included any kind of behaviour or interaction that they believed developed intimacy in their relationship (e.g. film nights, cooking dinner together, political conversations). They then responded with additional behaviours or noted that they did not realise those could be included even though they were behaviours that were significant for their relationships. This strong focus on physical behaviours reflects a particular view of intimate relationships, particularly a [hetero]normative understanding of what a relationship is supposed to look like. Although in practice not all of my participants went along with a [hetero]normative relationship model, it was consistently clear that that was the platform from which relationships were understood and against which participants judged the functioning or success of their relationship. As I processed this data, I continued to pay attention to the assumptions held by my participants and balanced them against the behaviours, attitudes and expectations they reported happening in their intimate relationships.

I coded the data, extrapolating key themes and patterns and then re-coded two more times in order to check my coding. At this point I exported all my codes and realised I had far too many. I often found myself coding topics that were personally interesting, but not relevant to my research aims. Because my survey and interview questions were grouped thematically, I used those themes (asexual identity, partner selection, relationship type and intimacy behaviours) to focus my codes and reorganise them.

Within “asexual identity”, I included sub-codes like “asexual definition”, “asexual transition” and “coming out”. “Partner selection” included sub-codes such as “aesthetics”, “personality ideals” and “partner identification process”. “Relationship type” and “intimacy behaviours” overlapped in my view so I sat down and tried to think more clearly about what I wanted to capture with each of them. I added any sub-codes that related individuals’ process of adaptation, relationship negotiation and relationship goals to “relationship type”. In “intimacy behaviours” I included specific reported behaviours, but still sub-divided them based on how they were defined (e.g. romantic,

sexual, platonic). I also included “motivations” and “consent”. Initially I had “coercion” in place of “consent”, but this caused me to overlook positive narratives of consent within the data.

With each chapter, as I read additional literature, I went back to recode and test my previous coding. I found this process kept me close to my data and also helped me stay clear in what I meant by particular codes. In retrospect, I should have listed all of my codes after the first few times I coded and sat down to write out what I meant by each code. This might have provided a stronger focus to my coding process and meant fewer instances of coding, but my process sometimes made me take note of narratives I overlooked (such as the transition from “coercion” to “consent”).

Throughout the writing process, I used the demographic information from the survey to explore correlations between social identities such as gender and patterns of behaviour. I entered my research with expectations that my participants would display patterns contrary to social expectations, but as I will discuss over the subsequent chapters, there was little diversion from the hegemonic practices of femininity, masculinity and heteronormativity. As my analysis developed, I drew on several different theories to examine these practices each of which are detailed in their respective chapters. Because asexuality is a rather new research area, I drew on views from different disciplines to create a stronger analysis (e.g. history, psychology, sociology).

I attempted to define key words and phrases to best analyse consistently and more effectively. I considered the current debates in contemporary research, but attempted to minimise the impact these debates had on my own analysis. Overall I define asexuality first as a sexual orientation and then as a social/political identity. When stating “identity” I am referring to an articulated sense of self. Identity most often was of a social and/or political nature. A participant could articulate that they identified as asexual and mean both that their sexual orientation was asexual and that asexuality related to some of their day-to-day practices (e.g. attending Pride). A sexual orientation, on the other hand, I defined as one’s directed libido. An asexual, then, is a person whose libido is directed at no one. By refusing to see sexual orientation as the direction of the erotic (see Jackson and Scott, 2010) or “sexual attraction”, I refer instead to the libido (1) to remove the definition from an assumed position of the sexual (given the social connotations of the erotic) and (2) to attempt to challenge definitions of asexuality in relation to an absence of practice[s] that is discussed in the next chapter. For the point of my analysis, “sexuality” refers to both non-sexual and sexual practices, drawing to some

extent on Jackson and Scott's (2010, p. 2) view of sexuality as "not limited to 'sex acts' or to sexual identities but involves feelings and relationships". I focus particularly on the relationship between seeking pleasure and one's sexuality. Through this approach I also hope to be more inclusive of self-sexual practices although they are not an overly common feature of my research. Like Jackson (2008, p. 35), I define "sexuality" to "denote a sphere or facet of social life", but, whereas she goes on to connect it to "sexualities" as well "to capture the variety and flexibility of sexual desires, practices and lifestyles", I resist the necessity of sexual desires. This resistance is important because seemingly sexual acts do not necessarily have to equate to sexual desire and instead sexuality can comprise of non-sexual pleasure as I will show in my final analysis chapter. Normally when I mention "sex" I am referring to penetrative intercourse. I limit my use of this word because of the meaning it has to my participants. They often would distinguish other types of sex (e.g. "oral") if they meant non-penetrative sex. In my first analysis chapter, however, I briefly to refer to biological sex (e.g. male, female) in my discussion on sex and gender preferences.

## *2.7 Conclusion*

Starting from the positions of feminist and asexual, I designed a qualitative project with the aim to understand how asexuals construct intimate relationships. Using the internet as my field, specifically the online community AVEN, I surveyed and e-mail interviewed asexuals. I thematically analysed the 68 surveys and 29 completed interviews. My participants were predominantly female, under the age of 30 and American. I had a larger number of heteroromantics than any other romantic orientation, which highlights a risk for possible bias in my analysis of asexuals in intimate relationships. Throughout my research process, I found that my analysis constantly shifted as my central aim for understanding how asexuals construct intimate relationships moved more into an understanding of the relationship between an asexual identity, asexual sexual orientation, heteronormativity and intimate relationships.

I also found that my feminist and asexual identities were not the only identities influencing my work. A third major identity of mine was forcing its way into my work and that was my identity as a creative writer. On repeated occasions I found myself resisting traditional academic jargon, deliberately designing sentences that were jarring and intentionally altering the meaning of words. This had less to do with my analysis and more to do with the process of composing the thesis. Coming at this research from a political perspective, being creative was a way of protesting the academic space and

engaging these narratives in a different way. I tried to mimic my online language usage, full of shifting meanings and displaced knowledge of what really means what for a preference of what does something mean to whom. Creative writing gave me a chance to be autobiographical as a means of grounding some of my analysis, but more so to be present (as an asexual) in the thesis. Autobiography and creative methods are increasing in their acceptability in academic work, especially for the way they challenge means of knowing, knowledge and how we express our “truths” (see Sarrimo, 2010; see Gillies and Robinson, 2012). Through creative and autobiographical expression, I find I am giving back some of the reality of the asexual voice and I am able to be my own participant. As I said at the start of this chapter, this is *me*.

Over the course of the next three chapters, I engage each of these identities to articulate how asexuals construct intimate relationships and these constructions in relation to an asexual identity and heteronormative practice. I thematically analyse participants’ stories (1) to understand how asexuality functions as a meaningful label, including the adoption of an asexual identity and (2) to investigate patterns of intimate practices—partner selection, relationship types and forms of intimacy—and their connection to heteronormativity, an asexual identity or both. I then conclude with an examination of the greater impact this research and increasing understandings of asexuality has at both macro- and microlevels.

## Chapter 3: Identifying and communicating asexuality

### Scene 1

An empty room. You and me are on stage-right in full spotlight. There is a stack of magazines next to them. You is very agitated. Asexuality is standing stage left in a dim light.

*Characters: you, me, asexuality (ambiguously embodied and dressed so that no physical features are viewable)*

You: (feeding Me with ripped out pages of the magazine) Doesn't this feel nice?

Me: (vomits up the pages to the side away from You) It seems a bit... odd. I'm not sure I'm liking this.

*Asexuality is pounding against an invisible wall separating Me and hir. With each pound, the light gets a bit brighter.*

You: (continues feeding Me pages, momentarily holds up one on best sex positions and admires it) Look at this! The angles and depth... (feeds the page to Me) I'm really enjoying this.

Me: (vomits again this time toward You) I really don't think I can do this.

*Asexuality is swinging an invisible object at the wall now.*

You: (feeding Me more pages) Just let me finish. Maybe you'll prefer what's to come.

Me: (takes a page and feeds self) Let's finish then.

*Asexuality continues to bang. Stage turns to black and Asexuality's banging continues for five additional minutes before ending.*



### *3.1 Introduction: Identity and/or sexual orientation?*

Scott et al. (2016, p. 268) in their research on identity in relation to asexuality found that among some of their participants, asexuality was a process of “non-becoming”. In practice this meant that one sub-set of asexuals “recognized, engaged with, communicated and managed the term ‘asexual’, but ultimately rejected it as a central basis of identity” (Scott et al., 2016, pp. 268-269). They ground their work in theories of becoming that operate on the premises that (1) “identity is not a fixed state of being but an ongoing process”<sup>40</sup> and (2) identities follow a particular “identity career trajectory” (Scott et al., 2016, pp. 268-269). Individuals who do not complete their career trajectory are then defined as “non-becoming”. Scott et al. (2016) go on to argue that asexuality was in fact not a basis of self-identification [for this portion of their original research sample] “because it [asexuality] was negatively defined, as a lack or absence of sexual desire/or attraction”; their participants discussed asexuality as a state of “emptiness” and of “marginal importance”. Because the label was not central to these asexuals, Scott et al. (2016) concluded that “asexuality was not always experienced as a social identity”. Having arrived at my research from a position of strong identification, I was curious about what role asexuality served as an identity—or social identity, at least, as Scott et al. (2016) refer to it—for my participants and whether they experienced a similar process of “non-becoming”. For the purposes of my research, I understand “identity” to refer to a label(s) of the self which inform(s) or impacts one’s day-to-day practices. Unlike Scott et al. (2016), I try to resist a formal stance on whether identity is fixed or an ongoing process.<sup>41</sup> To capture this engagement, I analyse how my participants came to understand the term “asexuality” as a sexual orientation and then using that as a starting point, I investigate whether their sexual orientation played a role in their social practices: if it impacted interactions between/with friends and intimate

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<sup>40</sup> Normally I would argue against this premise applying to an asexual identity in response to the way the asexuals in the online communities describe their asexuality as a state of permanence, or a process of “discovering”. However, here is where I might tease out what is actually meant by an asexual identity (i.e. Is asexuality more than a sexual orientation?).

<sup>41</sup> Because I was collecting the majority of my data in a very limited time frame, unlike Scott et al.’s (2016) journals, I did not feel I could properly analyse shifts in identity. Further, I was less interested in whether identity is permanent because my participants articulated a sense of permanence that did not interfere with my own analysis of their intimate practices.

partners<sup>42</sup> and how people who use the term asexual as a sexual orientation communicate their asexuality.<sup>43</sup>

One thing that is well-established in the asexual online communities is that “asexuality” is at the very least a sexual orientation ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). This means the term is used in every day conversations to describe whom they [do not] feel sexual attraction toward. It is unique in that it is specified as an absence. However, it is seen as the absence of sexual attraction and not the absence of sexuality or sexual practice.<sup>44</sup> Although it is not dependent on the absence/presence of a libido, “sexual attraction” can be explained as one’s “directed libido”. That is, that being asexual is having a libido<sup>45</sup> and it not being directed at anyone specifically.<sup>46</sup> Because of the variety of asexual sub-categories (e.g. heteroromantic, repulsed), the definition and understandings of asexuality are far more complex and often include attempts to claim asexuality through particular practices (or the lack thereof) as an attempt of creating a definition that is more accessible for visibility purposes. Participants also frequently used the term “asexual” throughout their interviews where what they meant by that term may not have been what they understood to be asexuality at the time of their experience(s). Therefore, to successfully analyse my data, I needed a clear understanding of how my participants broadly defined asexuality at the point of my interviews to make sense of how they were positioning themselves within their narratives.

As you may recall, one focus of research from 2004 onwards has been an attempt to define the term “asexual”. Three definitions came out of research based on the researchers’ participants’ definitions: (1) a person who lacks sexual attraction, (2) a person who lacks sexual desire and (3) a person who prefers not to have sex (Scott et

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<sup>42</sup> I chose not to include kinship networks in my inquiry as I viewed these as forced/coercive relationships with uneven power dynamics. I wanted to focus primarily on those relationships that asexuals sought out. However, if a participant discussed a familial kinship, I did not discourage these conversations and in fact discuss later in this chapter how familial pressures from the “mother” impacted some asexuals’ perceptions of themselves.

<sup>43</sup> Throughout my examination of asexual identity, I stay reflexive of the fact that these are collected narratives that I have acquired. They have chosen to participate in this study because they use the term “asexual” to describe themselves and likely are aware of what that means in relation to their social performance. It is possible that some of my participants re-imagined or re-told their story to match their current view of themselves.

<sup>44</sup> Because of an increasing social media attention (2016) around those asexuals who are repulsed and/or do not have sex, asexuality is increasingly being misunderstood as lacking or at least not exhibiting sexual practices.

<sup>45</sup> Some asexuals like sexuals can experience times or years of their life where they have little to no libido. This is separate from the identity of asexuality as a sexual orientation as it usually refers to hormones. This, however, needs to be researched further. Sexuals who lack or have low libido are still accepted into the asexual community.

<sup>46</sup> Much in the way that being a heterosexual would mean your libido is directed toward members of the opposite sex/gender.

al., 2016; Brotto et al., 2010; Hinderliter, 2009b; Prause & Graham, 2007).<sup>47</sup> The most common definition participants in these studies used to describe an asexual/themselves was someone who “lacks sexual attraction”. During the course of my own research, I similarly found the same high-level reporting of “lack of sexual attraction” as the main definition for asexuality. In fact, 57 of my 68 survey participants, when asked how they broadly define “asexuality”, cited a “lack of sexual attraction”. However, when asked how they define asexuality in terms of their selves/practices, only 38 of those 57 repeated a sense of a lack of sexual attraction. The other 21 participants described themselves through a behavioural definition which focused on the act of partnered—though it is unclear if they mean penetrative—sex: “[I] do not [...] desire partnered sex” (Liara, cisgender female, 27); “I never come across anyone that I would be interested in having sex [with]” (Misty, cisgender female, 20); “[I have a] lack of interest in sex, sexual acts, or arousal with another person” (Avi, cisgender male, 18). This seeming disagreement between one’s self-identification and self-reflection raised two tensions that were critical to my research: (1) a possible uncertainty among my participants as to what “sexual attraction” means and (2) an emphasised difference between “sexual attraction” and “sexual practices”/“libido”. These different views impact if and the type of asexual identity that emerges.

Some of my participants were unclear or could not articulate what they meant by “sexual attraction”. Caf (cisgender female, 21), for example, stated:

I know the common definition is ‘lack of sexual attraction,’ but I am unsure how to define ‘sexual attraction.’ I do, however, know how to define ‘interest in sexual activity’ and I know that I am not and have never been interested in sexual activity with other people.

Like Caf, many in the asexual communities, such as AVEN or on Facebook, struggle to explain “sexual attraction”. Often food metaphors are utilised to try to make sense of

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<sup>47</sup> Although AVEN is the primary cite for understanding asexual identity, more groups are emerging on social media—Facebook, Tumblr—where individuals are going to make sense of their sexual orientations. In these groups, there has been an increase in emphasis on asexuality being understood through a more behavioural approach. Members of the communities propose new identities to refer to being asexual and participating in x, y and z behaviours. When challenged, these members are ostracized, which creates a system of power and grants authority to these particular messages. Although this became more commonplace after my field work was complete, it is possible that these types of social campaigns have impacted how asexuality is understood and under what conditions one can “belong”. When challenged, members of the community argue that “if it’s a useful identity, don’t argue with it” to defend the continued development of these behavior-specific labels. This also possibly encourages people who use the term as asexual to also use it as an identity.

what sexual attraction means and/or represents. For example, sexual attraction has been framed as a craving. So when you crave that pizza on Friday night, that is your sexual orientation. An asexual could still eat the food, but never (or nearly never) have a craving. The problem is this is a metaphor and not an actual, workable definition. It more accurately represents someone having a libido. It fails to capture how an asexual could still enjoy eating the pizza even if they did not crave it, or how an asexual could crave the eating process, but not the pizza. Incorrect and/or incomplete metaphors, then, only skew people's understandings and without a better functioning definition, most people struggle to define themselves and an identity is not accessible. It is unclear as to why a direct definition has not come about, but prior to the emergence of asexuality [as a sexual orientation], it likely relates to the "sexual assumption" that people have sex and are driven towards it (Carrigan, 2011). With the assumption that it is a consistent state for everyone, there has not been a significant need to define sexual attraction. Oxford Dictionaries offers the definition: "sexual allure; (an) attraction based on sexual instinct or sexual desire", which is not all that helpful. It is a definition that uses its own terminology to define itself.

When Caf could not define sexual attraction, she instead turned to sexual activity to define her asexuality in place of sexual attraction. Yet, defining through behaviours is unhelpful for examining asexuality and— like any sexual orientation— there seems to be a range of sexual practices.<sup>48</sup> Asexuality is seen as a meta-category. That is, the asexual community is increasingly creating subcategories and sub-identities under the label "asexuality". There is such a range of experiences, interests and preferences among asexuals, but even moreso, there can be significant overlap between the sexual behaviours [and related sexual practices] of asexuals and sexuals, which means a behavioural definition does not offer a direct insight into asexuality specifically. Further, there is a convergence of heteronormative behaviours and emerging (a)sexual behaviours (which will be discussed in chapter five) wherein it becomes difficult as a researcher to distinguish between those behaviours that are part of an asexual identity and those which are part of the negotiation process within a relationship generally. More importantly, though, if participants themselves are unsure what is understood by "sexual attraction" and if participants craft an asexual identity and reflect their identity through their behavioural interactions, then it may be that there

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<sup>48</sup> This will be discussed further in chapter five.

is both asexuality as a sexual orientation and asexuality as an identity, as a reference to two [sometimes] different things.<sup>49</sup>

The second tension that arose when defining asexuality and sexual attraction was either an emphasis or absence of the distinction between sexual attraction and libido. An emphasis on the presence and operation of libido was noted in responses from participants who only cited a “lack of sexual attraction” as the definition of asexuality and exclude a discussion of behaviours/practices, which creates an asexual identity that is compatible with sexual behaviours and consistent with asexuality as a sexual orientation. Katya (agender female, 20), for instance, stated:

I have a rather ‘strict’ definition of asexuality, which I define as the lack of sexual attraction. It does not mean that someone does not have a libido or does not experience physical arousal, but that they do not experience the desire/need to have sex for pleasure’s sake.<sup>50</sup>

A distinction between “sexual attraction” and “libido” was not articulated by all asexuals, but was generally the position taken in opposition to arguments that asexuals lack sexuality and/or do not participate in specific sexual practices. This division between “sexual attraction” and “libido” may come partly out of tension between “repulsed” (repulsed by sexual behaviours and acts and often marked by an unwillingness to participate in any behaviour perceived as sexual) and “indifferent” (indifferent toward behaviours perceived as sexual) asexuals.<sup>51</sup> In the online asexual communities, a discussion around “libido” is used to validate [mostly] indifferent asexuals’ participation in perceived sexual acts ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). For those who experience repulsion towards sex[ual interactions], the notion or reference to one’s libido arguably becomes irrelevant as there is a distancing of the self from these perceived sexual behaviours, and, thus, participants may never see the need to make a distinction between having a lack of sexual attraction and having a libido when

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<sup>49</sup> My research may need to focus more on the reported intimate interactions for understanding how asexuality operated in practice than on how individuals define their asexuality.

<sup>50</sup> The latter half of Katya’s response mirrors those behavioural definitions that the others expressed: “they do not experience the desire/need to have sex”.

<sup>51</sup> Although not articulated in the narratives I collected, there is an understanding in the asexual communities ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) that there is a difference of experience(s) between “repulsed asexual” and “indifferent asexual”, which leads to variation in identifications as an asexual, specifically related to participation (or lack thereof) in behaviours perceived as sexual.

discussing their asexual identity. Further, the inclusion of understandings of a libido may challenge how others—usually repulsed asexuals—articulate their asexuality.

A definition regarding a lack of sexual engagement or participation was most common among those who did not cite “a lack of sexual attraction” as central to their self-identification. Ariel (cisgender female, 21) defined asexuals as “people like [her]self that have no interest in having sex with other people”. She explained that asexuals “can still feel attraction to another, form emotionally intimate relationships, but simply have no desire to consummate a physical relationship”. Ea (non-gender female, 24) and Lazeez (cisgender male, 46) both had similar understandings, describing an asexual as “someone without interest in or desire to have sex, without sexual urges, and for whom sex is just irrelevant” (Ea) and “someone who is not interested in sex or with a very low sex drive” (Lazeez). This emphasis on a lack of sexual engagement as central to these individuals’ identities suggests that a performance of [perceived] sexual acts would function counter to some individuals’ asexual identities and thus limit the form of their intimate relationships.

In summary, my participants, as was found in previous research (Scott et al., 2016; Brotto et al., 2010; Hinderliter, 2009b; Prause & Graham, 2007), define their asexuality in three ways: (1) a lack of sexual attraction, (2) a lack of sexual attraction that is defined through participation or lack thereof in sexual behaviours, and (3) a lack of sexual engagement or participation, but I found these definitions were separated into two sides and thus may suggest different asexual identities and/or intimate practices: (1) for the exclusion/limitation of sexual interactions and (2) for the inclusion of sexual interactions. Through the rest of this chapter, I explore how these definitions play out in an attempt to understand how people come to identify as asexual (if it functions as an identity at all).

### *3.2 Calling out the “gap” between Goffman’s “stages”*

Brotto et al. (2010, p. 610) found that their asexual participants experienced a “sense that [they had] always been different than others”, and this difference became noticeable around the time they reached puberty when peers began to express sexual urges that individuals who would later identify as asexual could not relate to. For most of my participants, at the time of puberty an asexual community had not yet been established or was only newly established, with online communities forming around 2004. Until the development of those communities and given the estimated only 1% (Bogaert, 2004; based on a National British Survey) of the population that is asexual,

many had no way or very limited ways of understanding the discrepancy they experienced between their wants/desires and those of their partners or peers. My participants reported first recognising or acknowledging this difference when friends began entering intimate relationships and sexuality became part of the conversation in their friendship circles:

I was 16, scouring the internet to work out why all my friends wanted sexual relationships, but I didn't. (Melody, cisgender female, 20)

When all my friends got boyfriends and girlfriends, I kind of shrank back from that idea without knowing why. I sat down and thought about what made me avoid the idea that much. I came to the point that it was really just the idea of having to have sex without feeling any desire for that. So when I imagined I would have a boy or girl friend without sex I felt comfortably happy about it. (Xaida, cisgender female, 37)

Melody and Xaida were both able to find a sense of resolution to this difference as Melody's internet search led her to earlier versions of AVEN and Xaida began to identify in a way very similar to how asexuality has come to be understood today. Melody's identification as asexual came at a point when access to the asexual community was possible, but prior to that time, she did not have the resources available to her. Xaida did not have AVEN as readily available to her but managed to negotiate her own idea of asexuality. I suspect, however, that this was partly due to non-asexual factors in her life such as an already present queering of her relationship models (Xaida lived with a woman with whom she wanted to raise a family, but she was married to a man for non-intimate purposes and was in an intimate relationship with a different man). Xaida and Melody were both examples of positive stories. Each was able to arrive to a position of "knowing" that allowed them to function in a manner that suited them, whether their asexuality was a prominent factor in that performance. Others did not discover asexuality until a later time and, despite many of my participants experiencing a discrepancy between the way they viewed sexual relations and the way their peers or partner viewed them, several entered intimate relationships and tried to mirror their sexual partners' performance, having little knowledge of asexuality.

This idea of mirrored performances is demonstrative of Erving Goffman's (1959) view of everyday interactions as a theatre performance and is useful for

examining how asexuality may function as an identity. Goffman defines a performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (1959, p. 14). He argues that “the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (1959, p. 15). There are two areas of a stage in which an individual performs: the front and the back. The front stage is an individual’s regular performance. Goffman claims that when “an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (1959, p. 24). That is, “fronts tend to be selected, not created” (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). The back stage is the space “where the performance of a routine is prepared” (Goffman, 1959, p. 210). This is the space where an individual is able to express aspects of himself that an audience might find inappropriate. This theory is then demonstrative of the limitations of not having an available performance and its related implications. When an asexual does not have an available front that reflects his back stage, it appears that they adopted other available fronts, modifying their desired behaviours and shifting their social interactions. This mirroring resulted in two primary trajectories: a narrative of heteronormative performance—or the heteronormative public story (HPS)—and [sometimes as a consequence of the former] a narrative of “brokenness”.

### *3.2.1 Just another actor in the heteronormative public story*

Carrigan (2011, p. 466) explored conceptualisations of “asexual self-understandings and asexual experience”. One of his participants reported only having sex because she thought she was “supposed to” (Carrigan, 2011, p. 474). As you may recall, Carrigan (2011) found “[t]his ‘sexual assumption’, which sees sex as a culmination of and prerequisite for human flourishing”, among the majority of his participants. My participants likewise articulated a dominant sense of “sexual assumption” and, thus, produced a sexual performance prior to their identification as asexual consistent with this assumption:

I initiated all kinds of conventionally sexual behaviour because I felt such huge pressure to be sexy in order to avoid rejection. It was part of my performance. I never initiated oral sex on me though, it was always about giving the pleasure, not getting it. (Sophia, cisgender female, 26)



The frequency I gave into having sex, I think. I did it a lot so I wouldn't be thought of as frigid or strange. I had one night stands because I thought it was what was expected of me [though one of the one night stands happened to coincide with a horny wave and it was a fun few hours between about a year and a half of disinterest]. Heck, I'd initiate a lot more than I really wanted because... well, I should want to have sex with my boyfriend... right? (Alex, cisgender female, 23, when asked what she would choose to do less frequently)

I wanted to be in a relationship just because it is what society says I was supposed to do. It wasn't until after I was in one that I realized that really I don't want it. I was motivated to do it because it was what I thought I was supposed to do. All the guys at work often talk about their conquests, I thought that if I had sex I would be a real man. (Shry, cisgender male, 27)

Each participant articulated a repetition of [forced] performance. Sophia even directly calls her practices a performance. Alex, however, described participation in these practices as “expected of [her]”. While she does not clarify who precisely expects it, the assumption is that it comes from larger cultural messages, such as the HPS. These practices were often heteronormative sex, which we can deduct from her cisgender female identification and partner's title of “boyfriend”. So she was in a seemingly heteronormative partnership, pretending at a heterosexual identity and adopting the sexual practices that culturally define this type of monogamous intimate relationship. If Alex does not have sex with her boyfriend, the automatic consequence of that is she will be perceived as cold and frigid, characteristics that are publicly viewed as unwanted or not ideal in an intimate partner. Her sexual performance is thus policed through a connection between sexual practices and personality.

Shry's combination of “all the guys at work often talk about their conquests” with “I thought that if I had sex I would be a real man” suggests that the available performance is one provided within his work culture. The performance is of “conquests”, indicating a strong masculine identity and a disempowered other. Shry's insistence on having sex in order to prove his masculinity suggests that an asexual identity in Shry's work culture may threaten his masculinity and leave him open to prejudice. The asexual performance is incompatible with Shry's surrounding audience and was hidden away into the backstage.

Sundrud (2011, p. 3) argues that “[e]ach individual becomes a consumer and producer of sexual scripts that reflect our society’s changing views of sexuality and pleasure”, if we hold this to be true, for my participants the sexual script available to them was one of expected heteronormative performance, or the HPS as I have more widely chosen to refer to it. Heteronormativity is an assertion of heterosexual relationships as the normative social practice; Nielson et al. (2000, p. 284) calls it “the default option”. It is the tendency for participants to discuss “sex” and mean penetrative, penile-vaginal intercourse. It is the assumption that one’s partner is of the opposite sex. Most of my participants took on a heteronormative performance, and the absence of questioning of their sexual roles also indicates an assumed sexual essentialism in which they “bought” into the messages and performance playing out around them. Participants then tried to reproduce these messages. While Sophia did not go into detail about how she learned them, she discussed performing “conventionally sexual behaviours”, acts that she later compared to one’s day-to-day chores. She made the comparison to display how dull she found the experience(s), but the selection of the comparison suggests that sexual behaviours are day-to-day tasks that one is culturally expected to take part in. Equally, this comparison makes these practices things that need to be done rather than something wanted or desired. She showed an assumption of perceived normalcy regarding sexual interactions and re-enacted those behaviours often without questioning.

Both Alex and Shry use language that implies a social pressure: “should” (Alex) and “supposed to do” (Shry). This type of language of expectation was common throughout many of the narratives. These messages were collated from cultural media sources. Often asexuals would seek out these resources as they tried to make sense of the difference between their [internal] experiences and desires (their back stage) and their peers’ front stage sexual performances. Alex explained, “I saw it on tv and [in] movies and read it in books. This is what a romantic relationship looks like.” Kippa (cisgender female, 25) cited using online materials to better understand [hetero]sexuality: “When I was younger I read up a lot on this one website that had all this advice about sex. I read erotic stories about ‘normal’ heterosexual couples and how-to-guides for things like blowjobs”. Alex and Kippa were trying to “learn how to be [heteronormatively] sexual”, once again without challenging the practices or their participation in said practices. This lack of questioning of the heterosexual norm is a pattern that I will continue to trace through subsequent chapters, but it shows how individuals co-opt the HPS.

Not all of my participants labelled this sexual assumption as heteronormative and many whom I have quoted did not directly call it that. However, when I later asked them to explain their own perceived desires post identification as an asexual, they discussed how heteronormative interactions were the most restricted, especially penile-vaginal intercourse:

The following I consider sexual: Penetrating sex, oral and anal sex, any activity meant to pleasure the genitalia, sensual massages. I have partaken in all of these and I have no problem partaking in all of them excluding penetrating sex which I personally find weird. But I can do the other things if it is necessary for my partner. (Robin, cisgender male, 24)

The only real change [from my coming out] that has happened is that we don't try to make an effort to have actual penetrative intercourse. Everything else has pretty much stayed the same. We both really love the closeness that comes with intimate sexual activity, regardless of whether or not any parts go in other parts. (Platypus, cisgender male, 31)

We used to have penetrative vaginal sex. But now, he knows that this is uncomfortable for me, so we often engage in mutual masturbation or hand jobs instead. (Heart, demi-girl female, 23)

For Robin, Platypus and Heart, penetrative sex became a point of emphasis within their intimate interactions. Both Platypus and Heart said they were performing this behaviour prior to identifying as an asexual, but always being at odds with their performances. Pryzybylo (2011, p. 447) argues that we live in a sexusociety in which “there are always forms of language, deeds, desires, thoughts that are suggested above others, that are coded as better, more exact, more ‘natural’.” Pryzybylo (2011, p. 447) adds that our society’s “over-glorified deeds (heterosex, marriage) are in fact accumulations of many particles, many actors who, swept by the force of repetition, may cement together for brief moments against actors who act otherwise”. For asexuals, the issue, Pryzybylo (2011, p. 448) goes on to claim, is the emphasis on the “repetition of sex, understood mostly in a coital and heteronormative sense, and the compulsion to repeat sexually”. The comments from Robin, Platypus and Heart support some of Pryzybylo’s (2011) argument. Heart, for instance, “used to have sex”. “But now”

highlights a point a change in her interactions and refers to a time that occurred after her identification as an asexual. Thus, prior to identification, Heart compulsively repeated a heterosexual performance despite how it made her feel uncomfortable. Platypus likewise explains that he and his partner no longer “try to make an effort”, suggesting that previously, an effort was made to some degree that can be assumed to occur from a position of pressure given that it no longer occurs nor is it expressed as a desire. However, rather than this being a rejection of heterosexuality, I argue that it is the beginning formations of an asexual identity, particularly for those individuals who define their asexuality through their sexual practices. Having no available front that reflects their back stage, individuals reach the extreme that Goffman (1959, p. 15) discussed where the actor believes fully in hir [sexual] performance and will enact that performance for hir audience(s); they will buy in to this “fronts” or, as Pryzbylo (2011) calls it “compulsion to repeat sexually”. It is worth noting that, although not all of my participants necessarily refused penile-vaginal intercourse, it appeared that those sexual behaviours which were most often struggled with and forced into aspects of one’s performance became the parameters for the formation of boundaries in intimate behaviours after an individual started to identify as asexual.

The drawing of boundaries around these particular sexual behaviours also suggests an asexual identity is often constructed around a narrative of absence. For instance, Ea (cisgender female, 24) defined herself as “someone without interest in or desire to have sex, without sexual urges, and for whom sex is just irrelevant”. If asexuals indeed repeat heteronormative scripts, then it might explain the way in which they choose to frame their sexual orientation as an absence of or disinterest in (mostly) the act of [penetrative] sex as they attempt to assert the performance they have always desired enacting. When looking at the definitions earlier, it was unclear as to why many of the participants who identified their asexuality through lack of sexual engagement went on in their narratives or responses to only acknowledge “sex” as the area of contention. The difficulty of the analysis is that some participants viewed penetrative sex as the entirety of one’s sexual behaviours. Bryan, when asked to define asexuality, made it clear that he did not see his lack of sexual attraction as a lack of sexuality, yet very few participants expressed an understanding of a more nuanced sexuality. That is not to say their practices remained entirely heteronormative, but it does raise questions for how asexuals form their own (a)sexual identities and whether those identities reflect particular (a)sexual wants/desires and not just lack or absence.

### 3.2.2 *Narratives of difference and “brokenness” as an indication of identity*

When speaking about sexual assumption, Carrigan (2011, p. 474) argues that the “ubiquitous affirmation of sex, its perceived normalcy and centrality to a healthy life, can preclude self-acceptance as a culturally available option for asexuals because of the concomitant repudiation of asexuality as pathological”. Although the DSM-V now formally excludes asexuality from disorders of sexual dysfunction, those who are not aware of asexuality have no way of understanding the normalcy of their experience(s); the exclusion of asexuality from sexual dysfunctions is irrelevant for an asexual who has yet to learn about the existence of asexuality as a sexual orientation. Scott et al. (2016, p. 281) claim that asexuality is a “hidden and concealable [identity], such as having a criminal record or mental health condition [...] which allow the possibility of ‘passing’ as ‘normal’”. If we hold this to be true, it would mean that asexuals would not be visible to each other and possible performances would not be directly accessible. For these individuals, the low levels of asexuality visibility means that the only available models for “normalcy” are often ones that affirm [heteronormative] sex and related heteronormative practices; the only available public story is the HPS. The lack of available models and the HPS as the prominent alternative creates a conflict between what a pre-identified asexual wants to display/feels and the cultural messages surrounding hir.

In her analysis of naming processes for asexuals, Haefner (2011, p. 87) identified a narrative of “Naming the Norm”, which is the experience “that asexuals feel different and do not see themselves reflected in mainstream culture”. She found her asexual participants discussed “expectations of sex” and a pressure to live up to the norm (Haefner, 2011, p. 88). Within this narrative, there was a common sense of “feeling alienated”, which resulted from their experience(s) of difference. Haefner (2011, p. 110) asserts that “feeling alienated seemed to come from an outside force or pressure that the participants could not reconcile with their internal experience”, which led to a sense of being “broken”. Although Haefner (2011) does not draw on his work, Goffman (1959, p. 62) claims that a performance is successful when an audience believes it. Tension between an asexual’s front stage and back stage, then, may lead to insincere performances, which become recognised by either or both/all individuals in an intimate relationship, or a general social exchange. It is possible that this translates into a sense of “brokenness” as well. Having no available performance that can come across as sincere, an asexual lacks a social identity, which could lead to the sense of alienation that Haefner (2011) described. Many of my participants, prior to identification as an

asexual expressed a sense of “brokenness” or received messages from their partners that there was something “wrong” with them as a result of their lack of interests in reproducing or struggling to reproduce heterosexual fronts. My participants spoke about their struggle to perform in ways that suited their partners’ needs and contradicted their own preferred performance in the wake of an absent available asexual performance:

In relationships, it had always felt my fault that this mismatch in needs would occur. I tried talking about my feelings, but because I didn’t realise that I just didn’t have the feeling of sexual attraction that most people do, I didn’t know how to explain it to myself or anyone else. I always wanted to belong and to be normal and because I never felt like I could be, I would beat myself up about it and blame myself. (Pia, cisgender female, 26)

My past relationships functioned differently simply because I am ace, even back when I had no idea<sup>[52]</sup>, of course. The reason they're different even when I didn't identify as ace is that I had a huge pile of problems related to the identity of being broken or frigid. So in a way, I did identify as something related to ace -- it just carried a lot of self-judgment and beliefs that I could fix it if only I went through some sort of exposure therapy. (Michelle, genderqueer female, 35)

I no longer feel broken. Before knowing about asexuality, I thought I was afflicted with hyposexuality disorder [...], and the doctors explained that sometimes hormone therapy could help with that. My hormones were and are fine, but I took birth control pills anyways in an attempt to ‘fix’ myself. Needless to say, it didn’t work anymore than ‘gay therapy’ works. But it did do damage to me...I started to see myself as un-fixable, not worthy of love because I would never express love in a desire for sex like everyone around me seemed to do, so perhaps I was also just incapable of love itself. (Heart, demi-girl female, 23)

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<sup>52</sup> Scherrer (2008) found a repeated notion of asexual permanence. This “essential asexual” line came up repeatedly among some of my participants. Sundrud (2011, p. 22) says that by “establishing an essentialist identity, asexuals seek to legitimize their asexual orientation, promote political activism, and align their identity with homosexual communities insofar as they co-experience similar forms of assault from heteronormative discourses”. While I did not find participants who sought to align themselves with homosexual communities, those participants who claimed more permanence to their asexual identities often were the ones most involved in visibility work.

The discrepancy between my participants' desires/needs as asexuals and the sexual scripts they attempted to perform tended to result in these narratives of "brokenness" along three lines: (1) a need for a sense of being "normal", as Pia expressed, (2) an experience of labelling and (3) a sense of seeming medically or psychologically abnormal/unwell. In each thread, there was a perception that one could or needed to be fixed; that there was something that would change the needs of these individuals and correct their back stage experiences. Pia discussed talk therapy, Michelle spoke about exposure therapy and Heart resorted to hormonal therapy. Not once did an individual question the state of sexuality as expressed by their partners as practices that were not "normal". The absence of a reverse challenge of what constitutes expected intimate practices illustrates how the HPS is so fixed.

This narrative of brokenness is quite significant in terms of post-identification as an asexual and seeing asexuality as an identity. Hinderliter (2008a) argues that it "is precisely the sense that we [asexuals] have felt different, broken, or confused and isolated on account of our asexuality that we feel any sense of solidarity with others on account of that sexual orientation". For those participants that experienced a sense of "brokenness" prior to identification, an individual's identity as an asexual became a significant feature in how they more broadly identified themselves. Unlike stories of "non-becoming" that Scott et al. (2016) found among their participants, my participants discussed stories of "discovery", of abandoning previous performances and adopting front stages in line with their desired experiences, of forming an identity consistent with their back stage self. Some participants discussed becoming more political, including an effort to work toward asexual visibility both on and offline. Others discussed changes in their communication, especially within intimate relationships. For those who did not experience a narrative of "brokenness", discovering asexuality as a sexual orientation appeared to be a bit less relevant, but this was more prominent among those who had not been in intimate relationships as long as other participants (if at all). Scott et al. (2016, p. 273) found that among some of their participants (n=7), although many had moments of clarity, "they did not claim [asexuality] as a fully-fledged identity". Many of these participants discussed that their sexual orientation did not transition into a significant identity partly because "nobody else knows that [they're asexual]" which rendered it "meaningless" ("Lisa"; Scott et al., 2016, p. 274). My participants appeared to struggle the most in situations where they had to negotiate their desires and practices. This suggests that narratives of brokenness and an asexual identity development more

generally may depend on the types of social interactions an asexual is involved in, particularly intimate interactions.

### *3.3 Identification and a shift in sexual performance*

My participants were very adamant about the permanence of their asexuality; they claimed that there was often an experience of difference or othering which is why I suspect a narrative of “brokenness” was so common. “Discovering” asexuality as an available performance then becomes a significant moment for individuals when there is a shift in their social performance and, in consequence, their intimate relations. I use “discovering” because individuals often did not report changing their sexual desires, but discussed a new way to talk about them and possible ways to perform them.<sup>53</sup> Until asexuals encounter asexuality as a possible identity, there is a lack of understanding that they can challenge sexual performance within a relationship, which leads to a suppression of their own needs, desires and interests in favour of the more prevalent sexual performances. So upon “discovering” asexuality, there is a realisation that the particular desires (or lack thereof) an asexual experiences are valid and can be expressed and demanded within one’s intimate relationship.

Identification for my participants began on online platforms where asexuals communicated their experiences to one another. The primary platform was AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). Sundrud (2011, pp. 11-12), who found a similar pattern, argues that “[m]any asexuals interact with one another on the AVEN forums and, thereby, constantly tell and retell stories about asexuality; these narrative acts often become the driving force behind their own performances of asexuality”.<sup>54</sup> Nineteen of my 68 survey participants reported that they *first* encountered the term “asexual” on AVEN and nearly *all* 68 (n=64) explored the forum and related pages shortly after hearing the term (often from a friend or sibling) to learn what it meant. Asexuals utilised AVEN to “ascribe meaning to their sexual history by telling other community members about how they dislike sex, have little to no interest in sex, or have sex to please their partner” (Sundrud, 2011, p. 11). This process of sharing gives individuals a sense of validation.

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<sup>53</sup> This is also why Goffman’s stages are so useful for understanding an asexual’s shifts in performance because they suggest a more stable back stage consistent with asexuals’ essentialist-like views.

<sup>54</sup> While I cannot speak about this experience for my participants, Sundrud’s (2011) argument is reflective of my own experience. When I had my moment of discovery, it was a process of reading stories that mirrored my own and then sharing my experiences. Others then responded to what I had produced, both new and old members. My language quickly reflected theirs; my understanding of my asexuality arose from how others referred to our shared experiences. Through these exchanges, I found validity in my lack of performance and my alternative performances (e.g. experiencing practices in different ways).



Further, the process of reading, sharing and modelling provides individuals with the language necessary to express their identities. Jay (2003, p. 4) asserts that “[a]s asexuals began to use the internet to articulate their individual experiences a complicated set of issues emerged: an inability to articulate nonsexual desires, annoyance with socially ubiquitous notions of fulfilment through sexuality and frustration at the lack of information publicly available about sexuality.” However, members of AVEN and similar communities quickly developed a shared language and my participants similarly adopted this language, suggesting that although many individuals had an “inability to articulate their nonsexual desires” as Jay (2003, p.4) claims, these communities became a space where that issue could be rectified. Sundrud (2011, p. 105) similarly argues that the “sharing of asexual narratives is a performative ritual that serves to constitute the asexual identity”. Asexuals’ shared stories focus “primarily on the past and present, providing rationale and reasoning for their identification with asexuality” (Sundrud, 2011, p. 106). This rationalisation process gave a sense of legitimacy to individuals’ experiences and led to a process of shared story-telling and repetition. Haefner (2011, p. 6) claims that “our stories live in our minds as well as our bodies; we think them as well as enact them”. However, for many asexuals, including my participants, these stories are not fully realised until asexuals gained a space to communicate them. This “discovery” of a possible identity was a marked point in my participants’ lives, often voiced as a positive experience of becoming and new found sense of self:

In discovering the asexual community, and in general the increase in asexual awareness, my confidence in myself and in valuing my decision to be who I am and not give in has grown. (Ea, non-gender female, 24)

[My partner] helped me discover who I really am and be more comfortable about it (she’s the one who found AVEN for me). (Platypus, cisgender male, 31)

Now AVEN forms a large chunk of my life. I try my best to give back in every way I can, because to this day I consider finding out about asexuality to have saved my life. I am now more confident, I can seek relationships with people I like instead of being terrified that someone might be interested in me. I can shrug it off when I don’t understand a friend’s viewpoint, and not have it reflect on me, because now I know that sexual and asexual are both perfectly legitimate viewpoints, just different. (Heart, demi-girl female, 23)

Here is where I disagree with Goffman's (1959) notion that fronts cannot be created: as individuals came to understand one another and matched their experiences with those they were encountering, an asexual front was able to emerge and be realised. Participants reported a distinct change in perceptions and social interactions albeit primarily in relation to their intimate preferences. An asexual identity was vocalised as a way of being who they really are that was not previously available to them. My participant Michelle argues:

People ask why it matters that aces come out, since we don't need to fight for the right to marry, etc. Because of that [cornering an ace into unwanted sex]. Because of those aces who have never run across the ace community, who need to know that there's an alternative to feeling like they have to learn to become sexual by forcing themselves into sexual activity.

This discovery is critical because it is a turning point for asexuals in which the gap between the front stage and back stage can diminish. Ea, Platypus and Heart all used language that highlighted a realignment of their performance with an understanding of self that had existed in the backstage. Ea discussed valuing who she was and not giving in as it was implied that she previously had done. Platypus also highlighted finding who he "really" was, which shows a prior performance of being something he really was not. Heart believed that discovering asexuality "saved [her] life". Heart's implementation of the dramatic is designed to show the intensity of her preference for her new performance. As each participant "discovers" asexuality, they were able to present a coherent self to both the world and themselves: an asexual identity.<sup>55</sup> Michelle highlighted the pressure of sexual performance—of a false performance—and explains that the way to break out of that is through "ace" (asexual) communities. These communities then facilitated a new type of performance—a new, available front stage—with new languages and practices with which asexual individuals can align. This new performance allows a change in asexuals' social interactions such as new understandings and forms of attraction (Prause & Graham, 2007) and different negotiations of their behaviours with their intimate partners and peers (Brotto et al., 2010). Both of these were reflected in the two common discussions that came out of my

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<sup>55</sup> By articulating a possible asexual identity, I do not intend to argue that this identity operates alone or operated alone within participants' intimate relationships, even.

participants' performative turn: (1) a narrative of relief and (2) a change in social and intimate interactions.

Narratives of relief were the most common response to one's "discovery" of asexuality. Brotto et al. (2010), in their own thematic analysis of asexual participants, found a similar trend, but in their study, the sense of relief was more about finding the community AVEN rather than "discovering" asexuality: "Some talked about a great sense of relief upon discovering AVEN, particularly in finding that many others had also experienced a non-distressing lack of sexual attraction like them" (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 613). As discussed in the previous chapters, asexual identity is closely tied to the asexual community and the social scripts therein, so one could argue that the discovery of AVEN enabled the discovery of an asexual identity. This is not, however, explored in Brotto et al. (2010). One of my participants, Ea, (non-gender female, 24) who made a connection between "discovering the asexual community" and becoming confident within her performance, reports:

I am less stressed out about performing, but "push" less for physicality because I respect myself more (and no longer believe, as I did in relationships prior to 2013, that I have to guess at and satisfy whatever I assumed a heterosexual partner would want).

My participants also discussed a narrative of relief that extended beyond the community:

Well when I realized I was 'allowed' to be the way I was (that it was in fact a valid orientation) it really took the pressure off trying to be attracted to people in a certain way, or hoping certain things would trigger sexual feelings within me. With that load off, it let me just ride my own wave and I could accept the way that I felt about people without looking too much into it. (Sam, cisgender female, 20)

I was really pressured (by my partner and by myself) before I knew about asexuality. When I found out, my own pressuring disappeared, I knew I didn't want or need it, and now I understood it was possible that a person could actually be that way, it was easier for me. So, in discovering I was asexual, I learned a lot about myself, and why I reacted as I did, and also came to accept

what I did as just who I was, not caused by illness or anything else (Dora, demi-female female, 20)

It [identifying as asexual] made me realize there was nothing wrong with the fact that I wasn't sexually driven like most people seemed to be. It was a huge relief to have...not a reason, but an explanation for why I always wanted to say no but said yes because it was expected of me. I was a healthy female in a relationship. In relationships, people have sex. I wasn't broken, I was just asexual! (Alex, cisgender female, 23)

[A friend] described me as being asexual. After looking up what that meant, I was happy, and felt like I understood myself better. It was a huge liberating relief, to finally have a name for who I was, and to realize that I was not abnormal or alone. (Ariel, cisgender female, 21)

Haefner (2011, p. 88) describes this relief as part of the process of "Naming Asexuality for Self" and her participants expressed a similar "freeing and a liberating experience" from finding an asexual identity. This experience is liberating because it gives asexuals permission to reject the assumed normalcy of desire for sexual interactions. What surprised me was the reported frequency of relief expressed by one's partner (if an asexual was in relationship at the time of identification). Some participants mentioned their partners feeling a similar sense of relief after feeling as though they were doing something wrong or that they were not truly loved. Charlotte (cisgender female, 19), for instance, described her (male) partner's positive response and the impact identifying as asexual had on her relationship:

My relationship improved greatly, my fiancé stopped feeling like he was doing something wrong and I stopped feeling broken, we basically stopped living with an unknown blame on our shoulders and we learned how to work through it. We're definitely happier and healthier.

The sexual assumption was so pervasive in their relationship that both Charlotte and her partner had internalised it as a fault of their own.

"Discovering" asexuality and the transition into an asexual performance was experienced inconsistently among my participants. Haefner (2011, p. 108) quoted one of

her participants who explained that she felt as though she was “missing a huge part of the human experience” because of her asexuality. This type of experience [of lack] was not something many of my participants voiced. I did, however, note some inconsistency in how quickly individuals accepted the label of asexual and started to change their performances. The majority of my participants reported that from the point of finding a definition of the asexual until they called themselves asexual, a process of identification occurred in less than two weeks with most participants identifying on the same day. For a few, there was a much longer time period (6+ months) before identification was either acknowledged or accepted:

I found out about asexuality a year into the relationship with my partner, and then took another year to come to terms with it and finally gather the courage to tell him. That in and of itself probably saved the relationship; he had been feeling unattractive because I didn't find him attractive, and so his self-esteem was getting eroded quickly and it wasn't healthy for either of us. However, having a word to put to it changed everything. Now he knew that this is just who I am, and it wasn't a reflection on him. (Heart, demi-girl female, 23)

When I first realized I was asexual, I was terrified that if I recognised it, I would wind up alone. So I pretended to not be asexual, to the point where I carried out a romantic relationship for almost six months while pretending to be physically interested in my significant other. It was incredibly stressful. After I broke up with him, I came to terms with myself, it was about a year after I realized my asexuality that I started slowly coming out to people. (Kay, cisgender female, 24)

Heart had the struggle of balancing an existing relationship with a new understanding of herself. As asexuals realised they could claim that identity, they had to find ways to create a space within their established relationships for their discovered performances. For Heart, though, it took significantly more time for that to take place. Her need for “courage” suggests an experience of difficult challenge(s), which I suggest is her confrontation of the HPS. Kay, on the other hand, mirrored Haefner’s (2011) participant: a pervasive fear of ending up alone, of being cut off from a culturally valued social experience. Many of my participants noted a struggle in finding a partner, which suggests that Kay’s fear was not entirely unwarranted; patterns of compatibility issues

indicate that finding a partner can be difficult (partner selection will be discussed in the next chapter). Nonetheless, as individuals claimed their identity, it opened the way for changes in their social interactions, which yielded further narratives of relief.

### *3.4 Changes in interactions as a marker of a shift in identity*

Participants' exposure to "asexuality" impacted them in three different ways relevant to the [possible] formation/adoption of a social identity: (1) a change in everyday social interactions, (2) a change in romantic interactions or within their relationship at the time, or (3) no overtly noticeable change. For those who reported a change in their social interactions, this occurred both in how they reported interacting with the world and how the world interacted with them. The way an individual interacted with the world was most often seen in discussions about asexuality where individuals participated more strongly in asserting plurality of sexuality. Dora (demi-female female, 20) explained feeling "more defensive of all types of 'different' sexuality". Emie (cisgender female, 21)<sup>56</sup>, likewise, stated a change in her "awareness of gender and sexuality problems" and felt a need now to "address these things better". Sometimes this carried over into friendships or familial circles:

Being an asexual doesn't exclude me from the discussions of my friends' love lives, and sometimes actually results in me being consulted about relationship problems. To my siblings and my friends, I am still simply myself, unchanged from who they already knew me to be. It has resulted in deterioration in my relationship with my mother however. (Ariel, cisgender female, 21)

However, my social interactions with some sexual individuals changed, as I was perceived by them to be strange, odd and weird, just because I had no interest in engaging in sexual activities, and because I would openly tell potential suitors about my asexuality whenever they would propose a dating or romantic relationship. I also had some conflict with my mother and some of my relatives, since they had difficulty (especially my mom) in coming to terms with my asexuality. (Orange, masculine female, 28)

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<sup>56</sup> A pattern of social action/a need to address things more widely was almost entirely voiced among younger participants. It is unclear if age is a factor in this low-level form of activism or if this is just a result of my sample.

Grandmothers would always say I would just have to wrench [*sic*] my teeth and get through the sex part – after a couple of years I would feel indifferent towards it. Mothers would always blame themselves for it. Fathers would always try to argue about the biological nature and how counter-evolutionary your \*thinking\* is. Aunts would consider you angelic and the only really pure creatures in the world. And neighbors would tell you that they would like to seduce you, so you would eventually like it. (Xaida, cisgender female, 37)

Through her identification, Ariel reported that she found a new role within her friendship groups, which was potentially a positive result of her identification, but noted that she was still “herself”, suggesting that asexuality as a sexual orientation provides a useful perspective, but may not always develop into a key identity. Ariel, Orange and Xaida all spoke about negative responses and reactions from their families, but not necessarily firm shifts in these interactions. Although there are many stories of supportive families within the asexual communities, for my participants, there was a common discussion of disrupted relationships with one’s mother. Orange explained that her mother and she already had a strained relationship because Orange had chosen a degree that her mother viewed as a “man’s job”. When discussing asexuality with her mother, Orange explained:

My mother, despite being a well-educated gynaecologist, had a difficult time understanding asexuality, and saw asexuality as a manifestation of my deviance, instead of a type of sexuality, and kept telling me that I couldn’t enjoy a lasting relationship with a man without sex, despite the fact that she knew through my photos in social networking sites and blogs that I enjoyed sexless relationships.

Orange’s asexuality became a point of dissension between her and her mother. The pattern of negative changes in social interactions seems to come largely from relationships involving individuals who assert a heteronormative framework onto the asexual, imposing gender-specific roles, and an unavailability of sex. So even as an individual identifies as asexual, there are still others who try to insist on heteronormative performance. It is unclear, though, why this was most often my participants’ mothers. It is possible it somehow relates to a heteronormative, western notion of motherhood and the misperception that identification as an asexual means not having a family, but there is nothing in my data that supports this particular theory. It is

also possible that the mothers are themselves in denial about the possibility of having sexless relationships themselves. For instance, despite evidence from her daughter, Orange's mother continues to reportedly state that Orange could not "enjoy a lasting relationship with a man without sex". It is also unclear if discussions surrounding asexuality happen more with mothers than fathers or if the fathers do not have any view that creates a lasting impact. Negative interactions that directly challenge an individual's view of himself as asexual, like what Orange experienced from her mother, often increase the likelihood that one aligns with an asexual identity. This is not all that atypical when aspects of one's self are challenged by larger cultural messages, but suggests the significance of the identity is sometimes in response to political activism and cultural visibility/awareness. If this is true, then an asexual identity might be less relevant as asexuality becomes more widely known and understood.

The second shift in interactions that lent itself to the formation of an asexual identity was a shift within romantic relationships and/or dating practices. The presence or absence of dating was not a signifier of an asexual identity, but for those who did date, identifying provided new means through which individuals could explain and express their desires or [more often] lack thereof. It also reflected on individuals' dating habits. Cynthia discussed a withdrawal from her original dating practices, whereas Jack and Emie broadly discussed a performative shift:

The realization of my sexuality explained a large reason why I had always felt something "off" during online dating, so I reduced my activity on dating sites and finally stopped online dating altogether. But it was also because I had a clearer understanding of my relationship approach. (Cynthia, non-gender female, 30)

I have just become more aware of what I want in a relationship, romantic or otherwise, and am open about those desires (or lack thereof) with the people in my life. That way, everything is laid on the table from the start, so that there are as little misunderstandings as possible. (Jack, genderqueer, 21)

I have stopped feeling the need to seek out a partner for sex on occasion 'just in case it's better than the last time' as I have come to terms with the fact that it's who I am, not my partner. I have started to approach dating by attempting to



forge a deep, meaningful connection with the individual first, instead of rushing into a 'dating' relationship. (Emie, cisgender female, 21)

Whereas both Cynthia and Jack discussed a withdrawal from activity, Emie briefly referred to a shift: she wanted to form a “deep, meaningful connection with the individual first”. “Deep connections” or richer conversations are important practices that develop intimacy for asexuals and significant value is given to these interactions. While the performative shift suggests an asexual identity, a greater analysis of these types of interactions specific to a pattern of intimate engagement among asexuals indicate that there might be a partially consistent identity.

Identification within an ongoing relationship was a much more complicated process, and the reported shifts in interaction were more variable. Cynthia was already in a relationship with G when she realised she was asexual. She informed her partner right away. G responded by joining and participating on AVEN's forums with her, learning about asexuality and became a very active participant in Cynthia's identification. Together they explored new relationship models and re-addressed each's relationship needs. They moved to a polyamorous relationship model to provide flexibility to acquire emotional intimacy in other relationships and Cynthia entered into two additional intimate relationships. These radical shifts in Cynthia's relationship style are indicative of an asexual identity being highly relevant to one's intimate practices. Sophia (26, cisgender female), like Emie and Jack, experienced a more performative shift within her relationship:

My performance of sexuality has definitely changed since identifying as asexual. I used to put on an act of sexiness, of being turned on and of wanting sex. That act has been with me for so long that I had forgotten it was an act to some extent. But once I understood my sexuality that fact became really clear, and when I explained it to my partner it made sense to him. [...] So yes, basically I stopped performing. The noises I made became natural and involuntary, and quieter and less frequent than before. I stopped making excuses for not being 'ready' (i.e. being too dry) [...]. We're still working on it really, trying to figure out what works for us.

Sophia said that she first became aware of asexuality through a friend, then further understood asexuality through AVEN. She found a correspondence between the

experiences reported on the forums and her own. It was from her new identity as an asexual that she found ways and permission to adapt her behaviours. Because of her identification as an asexual, Sophia was able to alter her performance, changing the frequency of sex and the frequency of (a)sexual sound. Her and her partner discussed how it would benefit their relationship if he was the one who initiated, further removing the sexual performance away from her. Sophia explained that “being understood and accepted as I am creates self-confidence, which has a positive impact on other areas of my life as well as in my intimate relationship”. She said that she “stopped performing” in her intimate relationship: “one of the things I like about being asexual [is] that I feel I can relinquish that social expectation of the woman in a heterosexual intimate relationship being the sex object, the one responsible for ‘keeping him interested’. Fuck that”<sup>57</sup>. Sophia’s identification and discovery became an opportunity for her to remove herself from unwanted interactions while building trust and intimacy between herself and her partner. So upon identification, individuals like Sophia, report being able to cease their false performance in their intimate relationships and function entirely or nearly entirely as asexuals.

Unlike Cynthia and Sophia, Wendy’s relationship was unable to continue in its previous form. Sometimes it is difficult for asexuals to introduce their identity (if they see it as such) as asexual into the relationship. The adjustment is particularly difficult if sexual intimacy occurs at a higher level of frequency. The experience of an ending relationship in combination with claiming an asexual identity allowed Wendy to have a better understanding of her own boundaries:

I feel like I’ve been more honest and open with myself since discovering this. After breaking up with that boyfriend, I knew exactly what I wanted in another relationship and with myself. I’m now in a serious relationship with a man who understands and respects my asexuality, and I don’t hold back on my needs and desires in the relationship like I used to. (Wendy, cisgender/genderfluid female, 26)

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<sup>57</sup> Although Sophia reportedly feels she is no longer pressured to perform in a heterosexual way, her performance is still largely heteronormative. Her partner acting as the initiator means that he has the active role, the engendered male role, while she takes on the passive, engendered female role.

Approximately 15 of my participants from my survey<sup>58</sup> reported that identifying as asexual did not change their dating or relationship style. While some of these still employed an asexual identity, this identity was not a core aspect of their day-to-day encounters and experience of self. Many of these participants were not in, or interested in, a relationship at the time of discovering asexuality. However, they did report a new support for their singledom and still established a sense of boundaries for the foreseeable future. Lua (cisgender female, 24), for example, explains:

I'm not very outspoken in real life about my asexuality, although I have discussed it at length online. I don't really feel like it's relevant in most situations. [...] Many people put a lot of emphasis on sex and physical expression in a relationship, and it's not fair for me to deprive them of that or to force myself into something I'm not comfortable with. I am currently very happy being alone as I work my way through my 20s and try to find where I belong in life.

Lua discussed having some form of active role in the transmission of information regarding asexuality. Her identification as asexual gave affirmation for her state of singledom, but she suggested that things might change in time. There was still a desire for a future intimate relationship (“as I work my way through my 20s” opposed to “life”). CS (cisgender male, 25) likewise embraced the singleness that he came to with his identity as an asexual. With a previous partner he had been under pressure to perform sexually, but he, too, notes: “I’ve yet to meet a woman who was interested in me and doesn’t expect me to perform sexually on a regular basis”. Both suggest that within their performance of asexuality, singleness is the preferred state to certain degrees of compromise.

### *3.5 Let's talk about the elephant in the room*

Brotto et al. (2010, p. 612) found that “[a]mong those couples where a partner was sexual, the asexuals talked about having to negotiate what types of sexual activities they were willing to take part in, the frequency, and the boundaries around the relationship”. Negotiating boundaries is a feature of all relationships, but asexuals often find themselves participating in behaviours that they are indifferent toward or do not

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<sup>58</sup> As my interview sample showed very few views consistent with Scott et al.'s (2016) findings, I analysed my survey results to see where and when individuals commented on performative shifts.

wish to participate in more often than sexual counterparts. While this chapter does not discuss the negotiation of behaviours directly, I found that, post-identification, an asexual identity was often reflected in the way people chose to outline their boundaries and how they communicated their asexuality to possible future intimate partners.

Sundrud (2011, p. 21) similarly argues:

[A]sexual identities evoke complex and deeply personal narratives and reflect the interrelationship between their self-perception, the perceptions of others, and their own performance of identity. For example, when individuals disclose their sexual identity, their narrative performances might reveal: (a) the name they give their sexuality; (b) with whom they want a relationship; (c) who perceives them as sexually attractive; (d) how they flirt and react to sexual advances; and their comfort with public displays of affection. These characteristics are not necessarily stable and unchanging, as heteronormative discourses lead us to believe; rather, individuals perform and re-perform their sexual identities on a daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute basis.

Thus, the process and conversation that may occur between an asexual and a potential partner is very much a reflection of the individual's asexual identity. In my study, I found that all 29 of my interview participants felt it was important, if not necessary, to disclose their asexuality to a potential partner. Michelle (genderqueer female, 35) sums up:

Absolutely, disclosure is necessary. 100% black and white, even if we didn't have online communities where you could create a profile and give people a summary of your interests up-front, yes, yes, yes. If there was someone who I knew casually and liked as an acquaintance and they asked me out on a date, they would get a speech on "I'm ace and this is what that means" before they'd get a "sure, coffee". [...] There's a need for disclosure because my lack of attraction is something that may feel very hurtful to them.

This concern about one's lack of sexual attraction—asexuality as Michelle understood it—as being harmful to potential partners was a common perception among my participants. Yet, not a single participant said that they expected their partners to reciprocate this disclosure of sexual identity unless the other partner was also asexual.

Shry (cisgender male, 27) explained that “as a society people place more and more importance on sex which means that it would be best to put it [asexuality] out in plain sight to avoid someone getting hurt”. Asexuality is then always a signifier; it is always the marked performance. In not demanding that the disclosure be reciprocated, asexuals are not challenging the sexual assumption. This also suggests a pattern of asexuals in relationships seeing themselves as the main compromisers. The level of that compromise will be discussed further in the next chapter.

There was also consistency regarding the timing of disclosure to potential new partners. All interview participants thought that asexuality should be communicated to a potential partner before they “started dating” (ADP, agender female, 28). That was generally classified as “at the first attempt of physicality (usually a kiss)” (Ea, non-gender female, 24). The insistence for immediacy of disclosure was consistent with a concern about hurting one’s partner. However, disclosure was also the greatest point of agency for asexuals entering a relationship. It was the opportunity at which individuals were able to establish boundaries and, thus, dictate how they envisioned a relationship and clarify what their needs were:

I communicated [asexuality] when they ask for sex by declining.<sup>59</sup> At first for various reasons: I may tell them I don’t go to bed with someone until I get to know them quite well. Or I may say “No” and tell them I just do not have those types of feelings towards them. At that point the ball is in their corner so to speak and they may continue friendship or dates or just drop out of any further involvement with me. (Suedoenimh, androgynous female, 56)

I made it a point to tell my prospective partners about my asexuality early on, because I didn’t want them to feel led on, and I didn’t want them to have sexual expectations in the course of the relationship. I also didn’t want to be pressured by a boyfriend to have sex. I only disclosed my asexuality to partners that I was highly attracted to and whom I had the intention of making my partner. I didn’t disclose much about my asexuality to individuals whom I didn’t want to make my partners, as I didn’t want my prospective partners thinking that I was making asexuality an excuse. (Orange, masculine female, 28)

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<sup>59</sup> Suedoenimh does not directly state she articulated an asexual identity. Although I do not have enough of a sample, it is possible that this relates to age and generational differences in perceptions of private/public social exchange.

I thought about what I would and would not participate in more carefully about a year before coming to the realization that I'm asexual. I figured I might still eventually engage in sex at some point if I had a partner again that I felt comfortable enough around, which would take a lot to do. It was something I figured was required at some point to make a relationship work. Since identifying as asexual, I have acknowledged that I can't change my complete disinterest in and revulsion to engaging in sex and sexual acts. (CS, cisgender male, 25)

In these reported experiences, my participants talked about what they would and would not do in a relationship. Suedoenimh said ze gave potential partners an all-or-nothing proposition through which ze established hir boundaries and refused to compromise sexually. Orange emphasised her role in partner selection. Initially, I was curious if the immediate disclosure and the minimisation of an asexual's identity compared to hir partner's identity might suggest that some asexuals had a "I will take what I can get" mentality, but in deciding whom to disclose to, Orange refused to compromise on her partner selection. CS articulated more of a nuance in asexual interactions. He claimed a middle ground and a willingness to participate on his own terms: "if I had a partner again that I felt comfortable enough around". Each of these participants claimed ownership over their interactions and desires. They were ensuring the presence and maintenance of communication.

### *3.6 Conclusion*

In the beginning of this chapter, I presented Scott et al.'s (2016) findings that suggested that for a small sample (n=7) asexuality was not experienced as a social identity. It was only helpful for articulating one's sexual orientation. I found this rather surprising given my own strong identification as an asexual and how I experience the world as a result of my social identity as an asexual and was curious as to whether asexuality as an identity was something I took for granted; if there really is something called an asexual [social] identity, what is it comprised of? While this chapter did not go into much of the detail as to what an asexual identity specifically looked like, I did find grounds to argue that an asexual identity is common practice, but is most relevant in those situations which challenge one's asexuality, specifically intimate relationships.

I outlined Goffman's (1959) theory of social interactions as a way of understanding asexuals' experience of a lack of available social fronts to properly examine my participants' performative shifts. Prior to identification as an asexual, many of my participants said they attempted to mirror heteronormative practices. Having no available front that reflected their back stage, they absorbed and reflected the most readily available front, which often led to an experience of brokenness. Identification as an asexual and the discovery of an available asexual performance then became a significant moment in their lives as they came to realise there was nothing "wrong" or "broken" with who they were and how they felt. The performance at the front stage could now reflect the experiences within the backstage. Asexuals used online platforms such as AVEN to develop their understandings of asexuality and craft a workable front. This new performance included disclosure to others occurring almost immediately upon identification. Likewise, disclosure in a new, possibly intimate relationship was expected at the first sight of intimacy, but this disclosure was not expected from the partner unless they were also asexual.

Scott et al. (2016) report that some of their participants viewed asexuality as a marginal identity.<sup>60</sup> While this was not directly evident among my interview participants, when I analysed my survey results, I noted that among some participants—particularly those who were no longer in an intimate relationship—discovering asexuality had very little impact on their performances; they did not see a performative shift and thus arguably had no need to form an asexual social identity. I did, however, notice a pattern wherein an asexual identity was likely if a person was experiencing direct challenges to their sexual orientation. At this point, individuals were motivated to articulate, defend and work toward educating others on asexuality. In the chapter, I highlighted this in the discussion of a tension between some of my participants and their mothers, but it was also a feature among those who had been in intimate relationships with a non-asexual partner. Upon identification, these individuals detailed distinct performative shifts, especially in relation to practices most related to intimate relationships.

This chapter, however, did not explore the intimate behaviours that asexuals began to demand from their partners and the exact form these new performances took. The general initial shifts in communication and performance often reportedly began with a state of refusal with an emphasis on what it was that individuals would *not* do.

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<sup>60</sup> They saw some value to having an asexual identity, but they did not feel it influenced their practices and/or their other identities were more heavily valued.

While the intimate behaviours that were then requested will be more fully analysed in the subsequent chapter, the active rejection of specific [sexual] practices is still a significant marker of an asexual identity as it is around this point where their identity is defined. As the chapters continue, I will further explore more of the nuances of asexual identities, examining partner selection before progressing into intimacy models (chapter 5) and relationship types (chapter 6), and develop a fuller picture of asexuality's negotiation of the heteronormative public story.



# PERSONAL ADS

<p>M seeking F. athletic. Call 07423619981.</p>	<p>Try our new mud baths! Call 01431263771</p>	<p>Seeking M/F for a few fun dates or a long term partner. You can reach me at 07986498335</p>	<p>01845237691. Mention this ad for extra 20% off!</p>	<p>great night out and looking for someone to join me! Send me a msg now! 07821464991</p>
<p>32/f/Hull looking for a good time. 072344552318.</p>	<p>Good looking, easy going man seeking a man from the North Yorkshire area. Call at 074216233991.</p>	<p>Tall, blue-eyed M personal trainer. Looking for a special lady to spend time with in and out of the gym. Must be healthy. Text me 07499621084</p>	<p>Professional woman seeking feminine woman. 32, average build. Looking for woman interested in yoga, hikes and cuddling up with a good book. Msg me 07821361149</p>	<p><b>WOMAN SEEKING WOMAN!</b> Attractive 38y/o from down under. Looking to meet some new people in the area. Give me a call at 01493266422</p>
<p>Come on over to Sweet Kitty's Thurs – Sat nights, 9pm - 2am. Dancers will be on the floor all night. 18 and up only. Black tie.</p>	<p>Fun, fit female seeking a charming man with interests in sport, outdoors and adventure! 07921486791</p>	<p><b>SENIOR NIGHT</b> 60+ men and women invited to Coppleton Community Centre. First Saturday of every month. 6pm.</p>	<p>Male, African. 29. Looking for a tall, female. Must be Muslim. Loves the look in a woman's eyes. Let me be your romantic. 07982461773</p>	<p><i>Ready for a night to remember?</i> Belle's Hotel is offering up a special package deal on their Love Suite. Includes massages, wine, rose petals and treats. Now 50% off. Offer good for weekdays only.</p>
<p>Lonely man seeking a one-of-a-kind woman. Let me take care of you. 07882399266</p>	<p>Need helping finding that special someone? Lucy's Love services can help match you to suitable partners across the area! Mention this ad and receive a free consultation! Call 018724698383.</p>	<p><b>WANTED: A UNICORN.</b> (314) 839-2689</p>	<p>24/f/local. Total geek. Seeking a guy who loves role play, comic cons and gaming. 016445213997</p>	<p>31 bi-male open to guy or gal. green eyes, 179cm, 73kg. Im up for LT or one nighters espec open to kink. give me a ring at 07998426617</p>
<p><b>MAN SEEKING WOMAN</b> My interests include hiking, swimming, mountaineering and cycling. Looking for someone active who can keep up! Txt me 07886642913</p>	<p>Male, Eastern European. 34. Investment banker. Looking for a smart woman to share some love with. Call me 07223491678.</p>	<p>Seeking serious relationships only. 31/m/Leeds. 183cm. 80 kg. Hard-working professional Interested in nice evening out, good movies, quiet strolls. Women only. Call 07128365491.</p>	<p>FtM seeking M. Interested in political activism and living life up. Vegan lifestyle. 079243226187</p>	<p>40 y/o cougar looking for a bit of fun. blonde and super fit ;) men 24-32 only. call 07292465571</p>
<p>Elderly man seeking a companion. Always at St. Sabina's Church for Sunday Mass. You can reach me at 01904432668</p>	<p>Divorced man seeking woman. 42. Three kids. Love family and romantic getaways. Will always treat you right. Give me a call 07821314771</p>	<p>Rosie's Flower Shop going out of business! Special deals on any floral arrangements for that special someone in your life. Pop on over to 4<sup>th</sup> and Summerson. M-F, 9 -3. Or call at</p>	<p><b>SPECIAL OFFER</b> 2-for-1 Salsa Classes. Every Thursday night is couple's night. Bring your partner to Patterson Hall and get ready to put some fire in your steps!</p>	<p>Want to post your own ad? Call 03149855941</p>
<p>Get your Significant Other a special treat this holiday! Now offering 20% off all massages. We offer facial and full-body massages.</p>	<p><b>Sexy, Sassy Blonde.</b> 26, slim, administrator in high end firm.</p>	<p>29.f nurse. Thin build. Love a</p>	<p>29.f nurse. Thin build. Love a</p>	<p>29.f nurse. Thin build. Love a</p>

#### *4.1 Introduction*

“Are you sure you just haven’t met the right partner?” I have been asked this question on countless occasions both before and after identifying as asexual. The enquiry would often be re-clarified by a further: “Maybe you need to try having sex with someone [else]?” This exchange was repeatedly used to undermine my identity, my style of intimacy and my intimate partnerships. These types of questions assume that a person could not possibly be absent of sexual attraction; they simply had not found the right sexual partner yet. They also perpetuate a romantic myth and the heteronormative public story (HPS)<sup>61</sup> of finding “the [right] one”. In her study on asexuals, one of Sundrud’s (2011, p. 65) participants stated that this same type of questioning influenced her to try “sex with multiple partners and [she] found it consistently unsatisfying” before she arrived at the conclusion that “she must not be heterosexual”.<sup>62</sup> The HPS message of the [right, sexual] partner is an everyday example of practices of the “sexual assumption” asexuals encounter wherein an asexual identity is found to be inconsistent with the public story and others attempt to then police asexuals’ identity. Because of the frequency of these messages and the pressure of the HPS, I was curious as to what impact the public story had on asexuals’ dating practices, with a particular focus on partner selection. The sometimes high impact of these everyday messages on asexuals’ decisions, such as Sundrud’s (2011) participant, suggests that asexuals’ partners might be compromises of their own ideals; asexuals consume these messages and occasionally reproduce them even when they identify as asexual (e.g. find partners who reflect stereotypical ideals). While I recognise that my own partner selection has been influenced by heteronormativity and sexual expectation<sup>63</sup>, I aimed to gain a wider understanding of asexuals’ partner selection so as to examine how an asexual identity functions against [or within] these dominant stories. What type of people do other asexuals seek? Where do they find these partners? How entrenched were these cultural messages for others? To answer these questions, I explored whether asexuals wanted intimate relationships, with whom, how relationships formed if they were wanted and what did these relationships look like.

To best analyse individuals’ partner preferences and selection process, I needed a framework for comprehending intimate relationships and attachment. In a discussion

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<sup>61</sup> Refer to p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> I selected this quote for the way it highlights coercive sexual practices, but I resist the false assumption that asexuality is equivalent to particular practices and/or enjoyment of said practices.

<sup>63</sup> I identify as a heteroromantic asexual who seeks heterosexual partners.

on adult intimate love, Fletcher (2002) argues that “adult intimate love consists of three quasi-independent modules: intimacy (or attachment), commitment (or caregiving), and passion (or sexual attraction)”. These are seen in studies on intimate relationships in different cultures all around the world with “people focus[ing] on the same three categories in evaluating their potential mates: personality factors related to intimacy, warmth, and commitment; a second set related to passion, attractiveness, excitement, vitality and sex; and a third set related to status and resources such as influence, age, money, position, possession, and so forth”, which makes it a useful framework for breaking up my analysis (Fletcher, 2002, p. 170). People have a tendency to vary on how much they value traits in each of the three modules (intimacy, commitment and passion; Fletcher, 2002). Most notably, some asexuals might entirely lack aspects of the set related to passion. Yet, this framework is useful because it separates “sexual attraction” from “attachment”, which allows me to discuss attachment processes that are [more] reflective of asexuals’ practices.

Analysing attachment within intimate relationships begins with understanding how people select partners and who they select: an examination of partner selection practice(s). I identified two key aspects of partner selection that were critical to understanding asexuals’ practices. The first is the construction of an ideal partner (and the subsequent compromising on those ideals when selecting a partner). That is, among my participants I noticed some patterns in ideal partners: generally individuals were not with partners who matched their ideals and asexuals compromised on similar ideals. The second key aspect of partner selection is the process asexuals go through to locate a partner, focusing on the primary spaces in which an asexual might select a partner and how an intimate relationship is then able to develop. I also identified a third aspect, which is the formulation of relationship goals, but this was inherently connected to the types of relationships asexuals formed and their commitment levels and thus will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Intimate attachments and the form they take have changed over time. Understanding the way they have transitioned helps me contextualise Fletcher’s framework and my participants’ experiences. Historically in Western cultures<sup>64</sup>, it was expected that partners were “someone within one’s own group” (Ingoldsby, 2003, p. 11). “Group” can refer to racial/ethnic origins, religion, education level, social class, etc.

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<sup>64</sup> As all of my participants in the interview phase were from a western culture nationally or otherwise (e.g. education), I only provided an historical overview for the west.

Ingoldsby<sup>65</sup> (2003, p. 6) proposes that “economics” has been and “continue[s] to be the dominant force in determining mate selection”, but has shifted from familial connections to level of education and the related assumption that a higher level education means greater financial stability.<sup>66</sup> Until the mid-1900s, couples were often formed or informed by a wide range of people (e.g. family, church, government). Post-World War I and II, dating emerged as city life grew, countries experienced financial growth, rigid class structures [further] waned and there was an increase in transportation via the increased use and affordability of the automobile (Ingoldsby, 2003). From the 1950s onwards, coupling saw a decrease in oversight and an increase in a sense of free choice. More recently, while “it is still important to marry someone who shares one’s basic values and role expectations, other aspects of endogamy have declined” (Ingoldsby, 2003, p. 11).

As notions of free choice continued to develop and social institutions that dictated partnering practice (e.g. the Church) lost some of their cultural capital, the social expectations of a relationship trajectory shifted. For example, cohabitation before marriage has “become a popular step in mate selection process” and is often seen as necessary for ascertaining compatibility (Ingoldsby, 2003, p. 13). There are still some socially-imposed restrictions on marriage such as familial closeness/genetic similarity, age limits and, in some countries, legal restrictions regarding sex/gender. There has been a continued increase in the age at which marriage occurs and an increase in the number of couples who live together, but do not get married. Over the years, “love [has remained] by far the most important criterion for marriage” in the west (Ingoldsby, 2003, p. 12).

Asexuals may also have a desire for love and partnering, but it can be difficult to find partners who recognise asexuals’ lack of sexual attraction and/or who are willing to spend the time to figure out what identifying as an asexual can mean for an intimate relationship. Prause and Graham<sup>67</sup> (2007, p. 352) ran a small study on asexuals where their participants reported that one of the main drawbacks of asexuality was “problems establishing nonsexual, dyadic intimate relationships”.<sup>68</sup> Because their sample was so

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<sup>65</sup> Because an in-depth historical analysis is not relevant to my research, I focused on researchers, like Ingoldsby, who work more with sociological and/or anthropological paradigms.

<sup>66</sup> Emond and Eduljee (2014, p. 92) found that “financial resources” was among the bottom three characteristics desired in a romantic partner. However, Arum et al. (2008) in their research of college students, found individuals were more likely to form relationships with those who shared the same level of education which suggested equal financial potential in a partner.

<sup>67</sup> This study was previously discussed in section on contemporary research on asexuality; see p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> In regards to my own research, I found this was true among some of my participants, but it was not necessarily a drawback central to asexuality as a whole. Further, aside from participants interested only in

small, I was interested in discovering whether this was also true of my participants. However, while many of the asexuals in my study did discuss difficulty in locating an ideal partner, most discussed entering meaningful, intimate relationships. These relationships were often sexual in practice, but I found a repeated conflict between preferred intimate preferences and actual intimate practices. To further explore this, I now move into a discussion of my analysis of asexuals' ideal partner preferences and show how asexuals and with whom they enter into intimate relationships with. Throughout I consider whether their partner selection preferences point to particular asexual practices, central to an "asexual identity" as outlined in the previous chapter.

#### *4.2 Who is the "unicorn"?*

Prause and Graham (2007) had a participant who made a point about preferring "nonsexual" relationships, but despite a similar preference among my participants I did not notice a high frequency of nonsexual intimate relationships.<sup>69</sup> I wanted to look into this difference between preference and practice to understand what was happening and why. I hypothesised that something must be occurring between the stages of what asexuals seek in a partner and who they end up with. So I thought it was possible that asexuals struggle to find (and prefer) nonsexual relationships, but rather than foregoing an intimate relationship should they be unable to find a nonsexual relationship, they more readily found themselves in sexual relationships. To better understand this process, I chose to start my interview process by asking participants about their intimate partners. Each participant was asked to describe their ideal partner and [preferred] characteristics of their previous and/or current partner(s). Two of my participants explained that they could not answer the first question. Sam (female, 20, Canadian) for instance explained:

It would be dishonest of me to answer this question in anything but the broadest of terms. I like a huge variety of people, and am constantly surprised by who I find myself drawn to (romantically or otherwise).

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platonic intimacy, none discussed a relationship goal of establishing nonsexual, dyadic intimate relationships. This may be reflective of my larger sample of participants in intimate relationships with heterosexuals.

<sup>69</sup> These types of relationships were often "platonic intimate relationships". This is discussed further on p. 158.

The rest of my participants, however, detailed four primary areas that combined to make their ideal partner: gender and sex<sup>70</sup>; aesthetics; sexuality; and character and interests. Each of these varied in how significant they were for my participants and how important they were to the overall relationship. In the following subsections, I discuss these four areas and highlight those which I found to be most salient and representative of an asexual identity, especially for forming attachments.

#### 4.2.1 *Gender and sex preferences*<sup>71</sup>

When I began my research, I hypothesised that gender would not matter in regards to partner selection. This view largely came out of my own preferences and the conversations I read on AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). It was fascinating to see how, after examining my data, gender did matter in ways that I sometimes did not expect and I was surprised by how much gender not mattering<sup>72</sup> could be meaningful, especially when it came to social identities. Similarly, I hypothesised that sex would matter very little and suspected I would find it only relevant when discussing participants' romantic orientations. While my findings largely support my assumption, sex, like gender, mattered in how it *did not* matter. Because of the overlap in how gender and sex were discussed and viewed, I chose to group them together in my analysis and examined their [ir]relevance within three areas that thematically came out of my research: romantic attraction, body preferences and genderqueer preferences.

Romantic attraction is the desire for close, intimate relationship(s), which is sometimes experienced toward a particular sex and/or gender (romantic orientation). While not all asexuals experience romantic attraction<sup>73</sup>, Bogaert (2012, p. 13) argues that “a lack of sexual attraction is not the same as a lack of romantic attraction, and *asexual* is not synonymous with *aromantic*”. Within the asexual community, “a person who is romantically attracted to the opposite sex” is termed hetero-romantic, “a person who is romantically attracted to the same sex” is homo-romantic, and so forth with pan-, bi-, etc. (Sundrud, 2011). Many of my participants identified under one of these labels

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<sup>70</sup> I grouped gender and sex because of the lack of clarity in the use of the terms. For example, some participants would state their sex as “woman”, but their gender as “queer” or “agender”. As my research did not explore whether a woman's body was understood differently from being female-bodied, I grouped the two together. They also functioned in similar ways: if a person had preferences, they generally carried across both gender and sex. Where there were distinct differences, these are elaborated upon.

<sup>71</sup> Throughout this section, “sex” refers to biological designation (e.g. XX, XY, XYY) rather than intercourse.

<sup>72</sup> “Gender not mattering” groups both an apathy toward a partner's gender and an absence of a discussion around specific gender(s) as an ideal preference.

<sup>73</sup> Asexuals who do not experience romantic attraction are called “aromantic” (Sundrud, 2011; see table p. 14)

and, thus, their ideal sex (and often gender) preferences reflected these attractions. Cavi (male, 39, American), for example, explained:

Since I [k]now I'm heteroromantic, it will have to be a female someone. [...] I have romantic feeling[s] toward women, they make me feel odd, wonderful kinds of emotions.<sup>74</sup>

Among my interview participants, hetero-romantic was the most common romantic orientation mentioned. Alex (female, 23, Canadian), for instance, initially stated that she didn't "really care" about sex/gender, yet she "tend[ed] to gravitate towards heterosexual cisgendered men". This "gravitation" suggests that on some level she does care; something is compelling her toward these relationships. Despite the high number of hetero-romantics within my sample, I suspect the inclination toward a heteroromantic relationship may be a by-product of the HPS rather than a feature of an asexual social identity. Sophia (female, 26, British) for instance explained that despite preferring feminine features, she only sought partners who were biologically male:

I've always been attracted to people who are biologically male but who aren't particularly masculine. The stereotypically masculine features such as physical strength, aggression, anger, loud/deep voice and so on don't hold any appeal for me at all and can be really off-putting. Whereas the more stereotypically feminine features like gentleness, empathy, creativity, softness to the body and facial features etc, I find attractive. I do think though that my preference for people who are biologically male is socially constructed, a result of my familial heterosexual norms and so on. I say that because I have no interest in the biological aspects of maleness. I don't find male or female bodies sexually attractive, so in that sense, it's irrelevant to me whether the person I'm with is biologically male or female.

While there are times that the opposite sex is preferred for the purpose of reproduction, for participants such as Sophia who neither want children nor are all that

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<sup>74</sup> In Cavi's response you can also see how he slid between notions of gender and sex. Cavi used the term "female" and "women" interchangeably as did many other participants, suggesting that (1) he is not aware of the difference, (2) the terms are interchangeable with the way gender and sex operate for Cavi/asexuals and/or (3) he understands heteroromantic to refer to an attraction to both a particular sex and its culturally corresponding gender.

interested in bodies, it is possible that some element of heterosexual norms creates implicit social pressure on these individuals. Sophia clearly marks an ideal preference for very feminine features, but compromises on those ideals by insisting upon a male partner. This behaviour supports the argument I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, that something is influencing the formation of practices that are counter to an asexual's ideal preference(s). The emphasis on heteronormative practice(s) also suggests that cultural messages influence asexuals' desires for particular sexes and genders. If those cultural messages are stripped away, the naked truth suggests a lack of relevance.

Similarly, Kippa (female, 25, American) explained how she prefers a biological, cisgender male. She cited first that she wanted biological children, but she then explained that "being in a heteronormative relationship is easier. Partners are more readily available, that type of sex is easier for me and it's ultimately less questions". So Kippa partly appropriates heteronormativity to diminish attention toward her relationship(s) and to reduce relationship and broader social work (e.g. defending her relationship in public spaces). A biological, cisgender male is not a desire, then, but a matter of convenience.

Kippa's preference for a biological child points to an instance when sex (and sometimes gender) was important to my participants: body preferences. Several of my participants either wanted to have their own children or already had children. For Kippa, the convenience of a partner who could essentially check all the boxes for her ideal lifestyle meant finding an individual who was at the very least male. However, sex for others also related to body preferences in terms of aesthetic or behavioural interactions. Dora (female, demi-female, 20, Dutch) preferred physically interacting with a male-like body:

My ideal partner would be of a male or agender/nonbinary gender. The sex would probably be male. [...] I've always been more aesthetically attracted to a male body than a female one (and in cuddling I prefer a flat chest). As for personality, I know I've been attracted by male and agender people, but just never female, hence the addition in the gender department.

Though she did not fully reject a female-bodied partner, Dora qualified her male preference with the importance of a partner having a flat chest, suggesting that the aesthetic aspect may be just as important, if not more so, than a partner's sex/gender.



Similarly, Platypus (male, 31, American) described having a type of attraction<sup>75</sup> “to female parts”:

While the sex of my ideal partner must be female, their gender identity doesn't particularly matter to me. I'm really only attracted to female parts, but if I came into contact with a trans man who didn't feel the need to transition to male genitals [...], that would be fine for me if the personality clicked.

These preferences for particular body parts were largely noted among those asexuals who, like Platypus and Dora, participated in intimate practices relevant to those aesthetic ideals, suggesting that sex/gender preferences (or lack thereof) may actually reflect types of desired outcomes (e.g. Kippa wanting biological children) and specific intimate practices.

Katya (female, agender, 20, American), in a discussion of hir ideal partner, framed hir preference in a slightly different way:

Well gender generally doesn't constrain my partner selection, but I tend to look more towards females than males because of concerns with any sexual relationship that may be desired by my partner(s). I typically feel like women are not quite as sex-concerned as men, or at the very least I'm under the impression that women would be more willing to let me do only what I would be comfortable with, sexually, than a man would be. (Katya, female, agender, 20, American)

Katya's vocalised issues with types of behaviours ze could expect from a male-bodied individual. This view seems to be informed by the social perception of men as active sexual agents and women as the passive partner (Van Hooff, 2013). It is also part of the HPS. Katya was co-opting these cultural messages for hir own construction of an ideal partner. In the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned wanting to explore asexuals' partner preference partly to see how individuals engaged with the public story. I suspected that there would be a strong link and here Katya is suggesting that for her, these expectations do in fact form the basis of her preference.

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<sup>75</sup> Attraction in this context is meant to be understood as physical aestheticism.

Although I expected to see patterns of cultural pressure and comments about the convenience of particular genders/sexes, I was surprised to also find that the absence of gender/sex or the queering of it mattered to my participants. I noticed a pattern where some individuals preferred partners who did not [strongly] identify with a gender and/or sex. Sometimes this preference operated from a political stance as a rejection of the binary system typical in gender and sex identification. However, I found that it often related to preferring a partner who could more easily understand asexuals' own non-normative social identities, especially if an asexual also identified or held non-normative gender/sex views. One of my participants, Heart (female, demi-girl, 23, Canadian-British), noted:

I don't feel a stronger attraction to any particular sex or gender, though I often find that individuals who are themselves a little queer in some way are often much quicker to adjust to my preferred "different" relationship style. Someone who is a little genderqueer in some way often intuitively understands that I myself am not really a "woman" [...]. Oh, and I don't really care about biological sex. I don't ever need to see a partner naked, so there's no reason for me to need to know what they have under the fabric, if that makes sense.

Agender, genderqueer and androgynous bodies create a sense of commonality that is desired by my participants: a wish to be understood. However, as this preference is contingent on cultural acceptance and if asexuality increases in visibility and/or if plurality in sex and/or gender expression become more acceptable, then I suspect this would no longer be an aspect of an asexual's ideal partner.

Heart's position may also reflect gender role expectations as it relates to intimate relationship practices and the home. She expressed a strong concern of "having gender roles pressed on" her:

I do feel intensely uncomfortable when expected to 'act like a woman' in a gender-role way. So my ideal partner would not be highly gendered. In other words, cis-gendered men and women are great, so long as they don't impose gendered behaviour on me, and genderqueer people are often quicker to pick up on my own slight queerness in that respect.

Heart worried about re-enacting traditional gender roles and being forced into a particular engendered role that she did not identify with. Her preference for a partner who related to her genderqueer identity was an attempt to find someone who understood that aspect of her and who could potentially even relate to the experiences of that identity, but also would yield an intimate relationship free of normative cultural expectations. This shared experience could create a “safe haven” in which Heart might find comfort and support (Heffernan et al, 2012, p. 672).

Sex and gender preferences, then, appear to be more of a consequence of the public story rather than suggestive of a particular asexual [social] identity practice. These preferences were generally established as a matter of convenience and/or as a by-product of [hetero]normative practices even when examining romantic orientation, which I expected to be more stable. I further found that participants were unlikely to seek partners who did not meet their sex/gender preferences, which suggests that although a particular sexed partner may be a convenience, it carries weight in asexuals’ partner selection process. This suggests that the HPS may be particularly influential in sex/gender partner selection preferences.

Two possible patterns emerged that possibly related to an asexual social identity. First, I found that although sex is often a matter of convenience, this is a persistent feature across the sample. A particular sex was preferred if and when it had functional purpose (e.g. for having biological children, determining types of intimate interactions and limiting other intimate interactions). Second, I noted that an absence of sex/gender was potentially relevant to an asexual social identity. If a partner was genderqueer or had a particular non-normative identity, then I found a practice of intimate bonding through a perceived shared experience. That is, asexuals sometimes sought other individuals who had experienced or could understand their non-normative position within the public story. This points to one area where asexuals could challenge the public story, but it was not the dominant practice and more often it was the case that participants merely appreciated their shared positions.

#### *4.2.2 Partner’s sexual orientation*

My ideal partner is not someone who identifies as asexual, but I noticed that many in the asexual community prefer just that. Studies around sexual orientation preferences among asexuals is largely non-existent (as of July 2016), but there has been an investigation into asexuals’ sexual preferences, which may underlie sexual orientation preferences. Hinderlinter (2009a, p. 9), for example, claims that most

asexuals do not “disidentify with sexuality” and that many seek out certain sexual interactions in their intimate relationships. In his discussion on self-identification among asexuals, Hinderliter (2009a, p. 9) outlines a few of the reasons for these sexual preferences:

There are people who identify as asexual who find that they can enjoy some aspects of partnered sexuality, even though they don't feel sexual attraction. There are also people who don't experience sexual attraction who are at least curious about what sex would be like. They may feel no motivation to do anything about this curiosity but consider themselves open to the possibility in the right circumstances should such a situation present itself. For such a person, their sexual preference is difficult to characterize, but they may have perfectly good reasons to identify as asexual.

Among my participants, many of these sentiments were most often expressed by those who were in or had been in a mixed relationship<sup>76</sup>, especially those who identified as a heteroromantic asexual. Cavi (male, 39, American), for instance, preferred a partner who “knows where they are at [sexually] and would like to take [him] with [his] sexuality”. He explained that he “would like to be physically intimate with a woman” where “she would let [him] explore her and [their] bodies slowly and patiently”. Cavi's preference is for a grey-asexual partner<sup>77</sup>, but he reflects the sexual curiosity that Hinderliter (2009a) discussed and is motivated to find a partner that can allow him to explore those curiosities.

An investigation into sexual preferences, however, is not necessarily the same as understanding their orientation preferences. It was because of this lack of understanding that I investigated the sexual orientations of asexuals' partners. After reading Hinderliter's (2009a) conclusions, I originally expected to find that an interest in sexual behaviour would be noticeable only in mixed relationships where one partner's sexual attraction would be the main motivating factor that is complemented by an asexual's curiosity, but positions such as Cavi's partiality to a grey-asexual indicates that this might be more complicated than I first thought.

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<sup>76</sup> A “mixed relationship” is a relationship between an asexual and a non-asexual partner. This will be fully explored in the next chapter.

<sup>77</sup> A “grey-asexual” is a person who may sometimes experience sexual attraction and/or is not quite sure where their feelings fall on the asexual spectrum.

Of the 29 participants I interviewed, 19 stated their ideal sexual preference in a partner. As I anticipated, over half of these (n=10) preferred another asexual partner. Four participants preferred a heterosexual partner, three had ambiguous preferences/no preference as long as sex was not a factor<sup>78</sup>, one preferred a homosexual partner and one preferred a partner who was polyamorous and gave no further restrictions to the sexual orientation. An asexual partner is seen as most ideal largely because of the assumption that it would then lead to a relationship that lacked a “sexual component” (Caf, female, 21, American). Caf, when discussing her current relationship with a heterosexual, explained:

At the risk of sounding selfish, I do not see any benefit to me or our relationship of my boyfriend’s heterosexuality. I would infinitely prefer for him to be asexual as well, and I am sure he would prefer it if I was heterosexual. It would make things much easier. [...] ultimately the “mismatch” in orientation has caused nothing but headaches and stress [...].

Geeske’s (female, 33, Dutch) comments echoed Caf’s position. She explained how “two sexual orientations in one relationship quite simply is not an ideal”. She compared it to a homosexual and heterosexual attempting to be in a relationship together.

Kay (female, 24, American) noted that although she had some preference for an asexual partner, she “wouldn’t have much of a pool to pull from”. Given the small number in the population that identifies as asexual and often the distance between them, many asexuals struggle to find other asexual partners. So although her ideal was to find an ace<sup>79</sup> partner, she viewed this as an unrealistic expectation for a relationship. Heart (female, demi-girl, 23, Canadian-British) similarly stated:

I might prefer another asexual if I had that option, though I have honestly never had the chance to date another ace. There are so few of us around that when I go to meets, I feel like I am among family. [...] So I am happy to date people of any sexual orientation.

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<sup>78</sup> I chose not to group these participants with those seeking an asexual partner as some sought non-penetrative sexual interactions.

<sup>79</sup> “Ace” is a lay-term for a person who is asexual.

This expressed difficulty in finding possible mates that are asexual supports what Prause and Graham (2007) found among their limited participants that I discussed earlier in this chapter. However, I noticed that many asexuals quickly compromised on this preference and developed intimate relationships with non-asexual partners. There appeared to be little effort (e.g. not engaging with asexual dating platforms) in their attempts to find an asexual partner.

Although preferring an asexual partner, many of my participants were in a relationship(s) with non-asexuals. Sophia (female, 26, British) explained that at the moment things were working in her own mixed relationship because her partner “doesn’t prioritise sex”, but noted that she tended “to find sexual or hyper-sexual men threatening” and she felt “pressured into putting on an act for them”. She located this performance in heteronormativity, or what I am classifying as part of the HPS.

Many participants were willing to overlook a partner’s sexual tendencies as long as there were limitations established within the relationship and/or, like Sophia’s relationships, there was a note of respect toward the asexual partner’s orientation and the practices ze associated with it. So sometimes a mixed relationship appeared largely asexual-asexual in practice. However, despite an often strong preference for a partner who identifies as asexual, the absence of this orientation was rarely grounds for dismissal of a possible partner and this preference was one of the most common characteristic of an ideal partner compromised on. Thus, the desire [or pressure?] for an intimate relationship was greater than their preference for a partner’s [a]sexual orientation.

Among those participants who clarified a preference for a hetero- or homo-sexual partner, there was no clear reason(s) for this. Some, such as Kippa (female, 25, American), could be speculated to relate this ideal to the child-rearing intentions mentioned before, but otherwise there was very little that explained this preference. Desire for mixed relationships suggests a greater complexity to understanding ideal partner sexual orientation practices. In these instances, I found that participants discussed an intellectual or emotional component present during sexual practices, which made the behaviours meaningful. These were practices that they did not believe they could experience within an asexual-asexual relationship. I will discuss this further however in the next chapter.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> See p. 156.

#### 4.2.3 *Aesthetic views and ideals*

In their research on romantic and sexual partners, Emond and Eduljee (2014) noted variations in what individuals looked for in a partner depending on if they were seeking an ideal romantic partner or an ideal sexual partner. Emond and Eduljee (2014, p. 91) surveyed 87 undergraduates with a mixture of male (n=29) and female (n=58) participants. In their study, a romantic partner was an individual with whom one would consider a long-term relationship whereas a sexual partner was understood as a short-term type of interaction. When considering an ideal sexual partner, both men and women reported that their top three sought after traits were physical attractiveness, sex appeal and fun and exciting personality<sup>81</sup>. When considering the top characteristics for an ideal romantic partner, physical attractiveness was not among the top three characteristics (Emond and Eduljee, 2014, p. 92), suggesting that physical attractiveness may be only important when considering practices of short-term intimate relationships and/or one-night stands.

Although asexual individuals report that they do not experience sexual attraction, many differentiate between sexual attraction and physical attraction, or what is more widely termed in the asexual communities as “aesthetic [attraction]” (www.asexuality.org; Carrigan, 2011, p. 468). Asexuals tend to use “aesthetic attraction” rather than physical attraction to move away from the assumption that physical attraction assumes a sexual intent. When considering Emond and Eduljee’s study, the preference for a partner who is physically attractive was among the top for sexual partners and not romantic partners, further suggesting that there is a strong connection between physical attractiveness and one’s willingness/wantingness to participate in sexual practices. “Aesthetic” is a term that does not carry the same sexual connotations and is more often attributed to fashion or art, making it an accessible way for asexuals to talk about their ideals related to a partner’s physique.<sup>82</sup>

As was noted by some of my participants, the body is sometimes viewed as a thing that is “just there”. Brotto et al. (2010, p. 612) found similar views among their asexual participants that alluded to a sense of detachment between individuals’ emotional connection(s) and their physical bodies. For some asexuals, aesthetic appreciation is understood as the body being a type of artistic canvas, but many of my

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<sup>81</sup> In Emond and Eduljee’s (2014) study, participants used free-form response to report the top three characteristics they looked for in a sexual partner as well as the least important characteristics.

<sup>82</sup> The subtle use of an alternative language is one way in which asexuals avoid the public story. However, the term is offered as an alternative rather than a direct challenge and some asexuals will comment about physical attraction.

participants spoke of aesthetics in the same ways as their sexual counterparts spoke of physical attraction. Much like the participants in Emond and Eduljee's (2014) study, my participants did not put a high value on physical attractiveness or aesthetics when locating an intimate partner.<sup>83</sup> My participants did, however, hold three different views in terms of aesthetics: (1) some participants did have some aesthetic preferences, (2) some participants developed an aesthetic attraction with time, (3) and for others, aesthetics was viewed as unimportant.

Of my participants who discussed aesthetics, very few discussed aesthetic attraction as an ideal feature in a partner. Dora (female, demi-female, 20, Dutch) was the only participant to describe having an aesthetic ideal: "Appearance-wise, my preference lies with tall, slender men with a friendly, intelligent face". The mention of aesthetics notably came after prior descriptions of non-physical characteristics, suggesting that she placed less value on aesthetics. Further, her aesthetic preference was qualified through non-physical characteristics—what does it mean to have a "friendly, intelligent face"? So although she had an aesthetic preference, it was still connected to particular personality traits.

Among the remaining participants, physical attraction or aesthetics was only discussed in connection with a current or previous partner.<sup>84</sup> CS (male, 25, American) explained that his previous partner "was very attractive at first", and Geeske (female, 33, Dutch) noted that she found her partner attractive "in an aesthetic way". Shry (male, 27, American), when discussing his previous partner explained: "She was quite beautiful, while in college she was even a model [...] though she was physically appealing what really got to me was her personality and her intelligence." It was interesting to hear CS say that his partner was only attractive "at first". This suggests that for whatever reason, he saw her as less attractive in time, which is opposite to what is normally seen in the formation of intimate relationships where individuals describe feeling more aesthetically attracted to their partner as time progresses. For example, when Xaida (female, 37, German) first started dating her partner, she did not find him aesthetically appealing, but as their relationship grew, her aesthetic view of him likewise increased:

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<sup>83</sup> Unlike Emond and Eduljee (2014), I did not differentiate between romantic and sexual partners. I also included preferences of those asexuals who preferred aromantic/platonic intimate partnerships.

<sup>84</sup> Due to a small sample size around this topic, I could not draw further conclusions, but it is worth noting that men were slightly more likely to discuss aesthetic attraction when talking about their [previous] partner(s).



Although everyone around me told me that my boyfriend would look amazingly handsome, I really didn't like his looks. On a scale from 1 to 10 with 10 being the best I would give him a 3 in the beginning. But I still very clearly remember the moment [...] that he had by far reached the 10 of 10. Sometimes I sit by a plaza and watch men passing by, compare them with the looks of my boyfriend and count people until I find someone better looking. Last time I gave up after 200 people passing.

Xaida's increased aesthetic attraction is not that unusual within intimate relationships. Gonzaga et al. (2008, p. 119), in a discussion of love and desire, discuss how one of the key steps for a successful relationship (measured by mutual commitment) "requires the foreclosure of other attractive options". Gonzaga et al. (2008, p. 120) further claim that "people in love often believe that they have found their one true soul mate in a world of billions of possibilities, and hence, the experience of love appears to help them genuinely foreclose other options". Xaida reached a state of foreclosure, but in CS's situation, aesthetic attraction decreased as foreclosure reportedly increased. This could relate to how [in]significant aesthetic attraction can be when selecting an ideal partner.

This focus on current or previous partner came in response to my asking what these participants found attractive about their partner and/or previous partners. Because a discussion of aesthetics did not come up in the sections asking an individual to describe their ideal partner, it is unclear how important aesthetics really were in these intimate relationships and, similarly none of these participants discussed aesthetic appearance as a reason for seeking out their partners. It also suggests that a feature of an asexual social identity in relation to partner selection practices includes a de-emphasis of the body.

A few participants noted aesthetic attraction, but marked it as "secondary to romantic attraction (which is based almost entirely on personality)" (CAF, female, 21, American) or exhibited patterns of experiencing some attraction, but had no pattern of aesthetic preferences. For example, Katya (female, agender, 20, American) explained that ze had met one of hir partners online and had spent some time connecting with hir on an intellectual and emotional level. Ze reports that later in the relationship ze "was able to see what [she] physically looked like, and also found her aesthetically attractive on top of emotionally and intellectually attractive". When speaking about one of hir later partners whom Katya initially met in person, ze reported that ze was emotionally appealing, but ze "was never aesthetically attracted to her". Orange (female, 28,

Chinese-Filipino) displayed a similarly inconsistent pattern when discussing previous or existing partners, only really highlighting one partner for his aesthetic appeal. In our correspondence, she selected the pseudonym “Pink” for this man to emphasise his aesthetic appeal, suggesting that this was potentially a defining feature for her within the relationship, but it was not a clear feature in any of her other relationships. This irregular pattern of aesthetic view suggests either a shifting preference over time or a continued lack of importance placed on aesthetic attraction, with the latter being slightly more representative of my sample.

Other participants treated aesthetics in a more offhand manner, not giving it much emphasis. For instance, Sam (female, 20, Canadian), when speaking about a partner, remarks: “Being cute doesn’t hurt either”. Sam’s point is worth highlighting because although the majority of my participants did not place much emphasis on aesthetics as a criterion for intimate partners, none of them rejected it either. Just as when discussing bodily preferences previously, there continues to be a sort of indifference to physique. It is likely that for some of my participants this related to their lack of physical engagement with their partner’s body (as was noted in the section related to the body when some participants discussed not minding the type of body as they had no intentions of seeing beneath the clothes). Further it raises questions regarding the relationship between aestheticism, [intimate] practices and sexual attraction and whether these elements are connected.

What remains unclear is if the public story is so pervasive and if physical attraction is closely connected to the sexual conversation, then why is aesthetics not viewed as more relevant? That is, why are certain aspects of a partner given more value than other aspects, if they are dictated or influenced by the HPS? At first, I considered that it related to what proved to be a point of contention. Asexuals’ ideal includes a preference for an asexual partner, but that is compromised and becomes a possible point of contention. Because the body means so little to asexuals, aesthetics are often not part of an ideal and thus there is a lack of compromise. If this were true, then an asexual social identity would consist of partner selection practices that de-emphasise the body, but this is perceived as detached from the physical/sexual intimacies participated (except where and when an asexual preferred particular body parts). A de-emphasis of the body also suggests a stronger role of other features when considering an ideal partner, including interests and characteristics. So an asexual would compromise on a partner’s sexual orientation because the wish to be in an intimate relationship is so

pervasive,<sup>85</sup> but asexuals' aesthetic preferences are not influenced by the HPS because of asexual social practices that diminish the importance of the body. This then does not challenge the HPS (as it is not in response to the HPS) nor is it an adoption or adaptation, but instead is a non-matter.

#### 4.2.4 *Personality traits and interests*

In their discussions of their ideal partners, my participants mentioned a variety of personality traits<sup>86</sup> and wanted partners with whom they shared common interests. I initially expected common interests to be related to particular hobbies and to be widely discussed. In their responses, very few participants discussed the importance of having shared interests. Sometimes this was mentioned in general ways (e.g. “We also have strong common interests, which I think influenced my feelings as well” [ADP, female, agender, American, 28]), sometimes it was given little value and not explored fully (e.g. “some common interests” [CS, male, 25, American; note that there was no mention as to what these interests were]) or sometimes the interests focused on particular lifestyles (e.g. social justice and equality topics or gaming). I found instead that the majority of interests discussed were related to particular traits (e.g. “artsy” and “musical”). For that reason, I realised I had to analyse the two areas together to fully capture this interaction, but I still dedicated some space to extrapolate any differences and how that might relate to an asexual identity or be summative of particular asexual practices.

Fletcher (2002, p. 135) claims that “higher similarity in partners in terms of values, attitudes, and personality traits, increases the chances of relationship success (in terms of both staying together and of attaining higher levels of relationship satisfaction)”. He argues, however, that this is largely related to an experience of similarity: “the more that couples *perceive* themselves to be similar, the happier they are with the relationship” (pp. 135-136). Given that sexual orientation was often believed to be an unlikely shared characteristic, the more limited perception asexuals have of a partner's body and Fletcher's argument, I expected that asexuals would seek out partners whom they perceived to have similar personalities. This is not all that unusual among intimate relationships no matter the orientation(s). Barelds (2005, p. 502) claims that “[p]ersonality characteristics and differences with regard to personality

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<sup>85</sup> The primary goal or motivation for entering a relationship was a wish for companionship. This companion was most often established as a monogamous other and with the suggestion of a state of permanence consistent with intimate relationship models provided by the HPS.

<sup>86</sup> Personality traits (or characteristics) include any and all terms which refer to a person's character (e.g. smart, funny, humble).

characteristics have generally been found to be important factors in forming and maintaining an intimate relationships”, especially in terms of partner selection practices.

In the previous section, I discussed Emond and Eduljee’s (2014) work on characteristic preferences in sexual and romantic partners, and, when looking only at romantic partners, there was no mention of physical attractiveness. Instead, the top three characteristics reported for ideal romantic partners among men were loyalty, humour and mutual love and among women it was loyalty, mutual love<sup>87</sup> and kindness (Emond and Eduljee, 2014, p. 92). While my participants similarly did not report a high level of importance of physical attractiveness, there was little overlap of ideal romantic partner characteristics between Emond and Eduljee’s (2014) population and my own. I noted importance based on frequency across the data set. Among those participants who discussed key characteristics that were important to them (n=24), intelligence was the most common (n=10), followed by open-mindedness (n=3), respectfulness (n=3), emotional strength/intelligence (n=3), humour (n=3), independence (n=2) and non-dominance (n=2).<sup>88</sup>

Intelligence was the highest reported characteristic trait among my participants and unlike the other features reported, more space was given to intelligence when explaining one’s reasoning than any other. For instance, Dora (female, demi-female, 20, Dutch) sought an ideal partner who “would be very intelligent, but mostly in the curious/wanting-to-learn-things way”. That is, often my participants would spend an entire line or paragraph speaking about intelligence and either its importance or how its display in a current relationship impacted on them, while other characteristics often were mentioned in a list sequence. Geeske (female, 33, Dutch), when speaking about other traits, listed how an ideal partner would “need to have a good, open and honest character, someone who behaves well and who is open-minded”, or similarly Ghost (male, 24, American) described someone who “is quiet, relaxed and romantic [in] every sense of the word. She would be easy going, self-sufficient and sweet”. In instances of listing that included intelligence, it was most often the first in the list: “[an ideal partner is someone] who is intelligent, a good conversationalist with a good sense of humor, friendly, diligent and kind” (Orange, female, 28, Chinese-Filipino). The space and position given to intelligence suggests that it is a valuable characteristic for many

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<sup>87</sup> I disagree with Emond and Eduljee’s (2014) inclusion of this term as a characteristic. Mutual love suggests a practice rather than a definitive characteristic (e.g. loving).

<sup>88</sup> Traits that were only mentioned by a single participant were not included in this list. I also removed traits that referred to shared interests (e.g. artistic, musical).

asexuals and one that they are less likely to compromise on. Finding an intellectual partner then is likely to be a significant marker of asexuals' selection practices.

One reason that intelligence proved to be so crucial to asexuals' partner selection practices is that it seems that some individuals' emotional bonds are formed largely out of their intellectual connections. For instance, earlier I discussed how Katya (female, agender, 20, American) met one of her partners online. Ze explained:

I originally met [her] online, so the first thing that attracted me to her was her intelligence and contemplative nature. She first messaged me, and was flirty, intelligent, and provided thought-provoking conversation. The fact that she kept me entertained, mentally on my toes, was a wonderful conversationalist, and genuinely sweet to me attracted me to her.

Katya, like many of my participants, was drawn in through the intellectual abilities of her partner, but stayed engaged because of the way the intellectual bond allowed for an intimate connection. Cynthia (female, agender, 30, Chinese) similarly noted:

I select partners based on our intellectual connection first and foremost. I need to talk to them, get to know their personality and ideas, and build a connection over time. If we have a great intellectual connection, it's almost certain that I'll develop an emotional attachment to them. (Cynthia, female, agender, 30, Chinese)

Intelligence was key to having interactions and interests that were considered essential to a sense of intimacy in the relationship, which meant that intelligence is not only an essential part of asexual partner selection practices, but is a critical feature of asexual intimate relationships. In terms of preferred interests, intelligence was also coupled with a desire for partners interested in political inquiry, reading/viewing texts (and discussing) and social activism. It was most relevant to those participants who sought partners that had interests in intellectual or, as Katya called it, "thought-provoking" conversations. Intellectual conversations require an individual to have both the ability (trait) and interest in, which meant that the trait and behaviour were inherently connected. These conversations were critical to intellectual intimacy<sup>89</sup> and

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<sup>89</sup> For a complete discussion on intellectual intimacy see p. 31.

individuals feeling fulfilled in their intimate relationship(s). Thus, they were the least likely to be conceded when entering an intimate relationship.

While there was variability among the next most common characteristic preferred in an ideal partner, many of the identified characteristics referred to a partner being respectful. Sam (female, 20, Canadian) summarises the importance of respect:

Having personal standards of self-respect influences how I evaluate relationships while I'm in them, and if I recognize that I'm not getting the respect I deserve (or not giving the respect I deserve), I identify the relationship as borderline if not fully unhealthy and have to get myself out.

Sam discussed respect as both self-respect and respect toward others. I noticed respect in terms of three elements related to these two views: respect in relation to listening; respect and its relation to sexual interactions and personal boundaries; and respect as synonymous to a state of non-dominance.

Heart (female, demi-girl, 23, Canadian-English) explained that respect sometimes meant respectfully listening, which could be “even harder than talking”. Respect in this instance meant feeling heard and understood, especially in mixed intimate relationships. In these relationships, respect was repeatedly instrumental for creating and maintaining boundaries within a relationship and knowing that they would hold. The practice of respect in the form of listening was also voiced as tangential to building trust.

More of my participants highlighted respect by connecting it back to their sexual orientation and/or personal boundaries. My participants wanted to be sure that they had a partner who either accepted or respected their sexual orientation and the types of interactions (or lack thereof) that resulted from that orientation. For instance, when discussing what she finds attractive about her partner, Alex explained:

He's kind and he respects me. He treated me like a person rather than a potential date, which is always something I prefer (for obvious reasons) the first time we met. And he still treats me like a person rather than a typical girlfriend, which I like too.

Alex felt a sense of respect from her partner through the way he treated her, but specifically through a limitation of practices and decreased [intimate] interaction.

Sophia (female, 26, British) used a similar structure to emphasise respect stating that her partner “respects [her] asexuality” because of the way he does not make sex the focus of their intimate interactions. This type of respect was viewed as essential for individuals’ relationships because it allowed the asexual partner[s] to feel comfortable within their intimate relationships (e.g. feel that they would not be pressured into undesired behaviours). It also highlighted another way in which there was a connection between idealised traits and desired interactions. For example, Caf (female, 21, American) wanted a partner who respected her independence and trusted her: someone who recognised the boundaries set and understood that there was a need for the creation of particular spaces. This type of respect appeared particularly relevant when an asexual identity was present. Much in the way some of my participants preferred a genderqueer partner to connect with around a shared experience, these participants sought someone made an effort to be open to the identity, who listened to how it was presented and acted appropriately and/or empathetically.

Some asexuals sought respect but in terms of a partner who was “less dominant” or “non-dominant”. Alex (female, 23, Canadian) explained:

As for characters, I prefer generally non-dominant men. [...] If someone comes on too strong I tend not to go for them, and I find men who are more dominant generally expect to get what they want, which is a big personality turn off for me. Also, if the come ons are incredibly sexual then that’s a big turn off for me as well, and I find overly dominant and high testosterone men usually take that approach whereas the less dominant a person is the less like it is they’re going to come on strong.

Dominance was not a common characteristic discussed and where it was mentioned, it was only by female participants. The reiteration of masculine and male stereotypes (e.g. dominance, aggression) suggests that for some asexuals, these cultural messages are quite strong and carry a particular type of social capital within the formation of their relationships. These messages mirror the similarly off-putting social message of sexual performance/sexual compulsion expected with a heterosexual [especially a male] partner. This again suggests that the public story encompassing the sexual assumption is pervasive. Despite these messages being often misinformed, the stereotypes carry weight in asexuals’ selection of intimate partners and the avoidance of these particularly masculine traits.

When interests were mentioned but did not relate to a particular trait, it was most often when discussing wanted lifestyles. Orange (female, 28, Chinese-Filipino), for instance, explained:

I would also highly appreciate it if the person has a particular advocacy in life, such as environmentalism, or human rights, or if he participates in charity, because those advocacies are close to my heart.

Orange sought a partner who had a particular inclination toward doing work for others or the environment because of its importance to her. Having shared ideological dispositions and lifestyle preferences is not unusual for any intimate relationship(s). Individuals will often select intimate partners who have similar political positions or moral standards. This is not something unique to asexuality. Platypus (male, 31, American) sought a partner who played video games, explaining:

The only partners I've ever had I met through video games. It's a passion of mine, and so it's where I meet the majority of the people that I have any long-term association with. A person really needs to compliment my interests, even if they don't share the same exact ones.

Platypus interacts with the world often through gaming platforms. Again, choosing to have a partner who interacts in the same social spaces as you is not unique to asexuality.

Although shared interests and lifestyles does not point to particular preferences, there were some noticeable trends found among my participants that do point to some sort of asexual practice(s). Intelligence was a very significant characteristic. Participants spent a good deal of time discussing this trait and detailing how it operates. It was seen to connect to the formation of emotional attachments. It was also the one thing that asexuals rarely compromised on. I conclude, then, that although it is not unique to asexuality, asexual partner selection practices include an emphasis on intelligence. I also found a high valuing of respect. Again, this is not unique to asexuals, but the way respect operated pointed to an earlier finding: asexuals seek aspects and types of relationships that allow them to maintain a stable social identity. Preferring a partner who can understand their asexuality and engages in it allows an asexual to continue to practice that identity. If the asexual identity was not relevant to my participants, I would have expected respect to be discussed more in terms of general opinions. However, it



was mentioned specifically in regards to an asexual's identity, suggesting the importance and presence of an identity and intimate practices of safeguarding it. The dominance of these preferences suggest that the HPS has possibly minimal influence in asexuals' selection practices as they relate to partners' personalities.

#### *4.3 Practices for recognising and locating partners*

The first section of this chapter explored the construction of an ideal partner and its relations to the pressures of a public story that assumes sexual attraction, notions of “the one” and ideals of romantic love. I briefly discussed some of the aspects of an ideal partner that were more or less valued when selecting a partner and how some of these were significant for an asexual identity, or possibly influenced by the HPS. This section builds on those findings to further investigate the process of partner identification and early attachment, focusing on the primary spaces in which an asexual might select a partner and how an intimate relationship is then able to develop. Asexuals do not overly differentiate in the spaces where they find partners—such as shared spaces of interaction (e.g. school, work), online dating websites and friendship groups—compared to sexuals. Throughout this section, however, I will discuss the emphasis asexuals place on certain types of relationships and the way my participants negotiated these spaces differently from their sexual peers to point to particular asexual practices. Further, I will explore a high reported frequency of an absence of seeking an intimate relationship despite reported desire to be in one. This section presents three types of relationships asexuals enter to locate intimate partners and develop an intimate relationship with: pragmatic relationships, long-term friendship relationships and online relationships.

##### *4.3.1 Pragmatic and/or intentional relationship formation*

I use “pragmatic” and/or “intentional” relationship formation to refer to intimate relationships that develop out of an initial goal, project and/or opportunity. Generally, there were three forms of intentional relationships that developed around these features: relationships for function or pragmatism; relationships for support; and what I call relationship through intentional proximity. A relationship that starts from a position of function or pragmatism is one in which an intimate partner is reportedly selected for “rational reasons”. ADP (female, agender, 28, American) for instance chose one of her partners “for rational reasons”. “Rational reasons” in the context of my participants' communications referred to the perceived purpose a partner could serve. Kippa (female, 25, American) explained that she “always looked for a partner from a pragmatic

viewpoint: someone taller, stronger, opposite so as to suit the things” she does not. She looked for partners for their utility—height to reach things she could not, [physical] strength to carry what she could not and other opposing traits that she believed could be useful. Participants like her sometimes justified being in an intimate relationship through reasons other than for the sake of having an intimate relationship. Robin (male, 24, Scottish-Swedish) for instance detailed:

The second time [I entered a relationship] was for the sake of finding a friend who could show me the new city I had moved to. That failed because I was not willing to kiss, since the concept of kissing eluded me at the time and I was not willing to compromise since he was dull minded and he was of little use to me after showing me around. [...] The third time I needed someone to help me with my studies so I looked for a person that fitted my ideals and asked for help. That person helped me study and after some time she asked me out. [...] If I would seek out a partner today I would probably wait until I needed something from a partner, just looking for the sake is a concept I do not understand.

Robin’s intimate relationships were developed out of a purpose-driven connection. They served a function or goal, from learning about the new city to receiving support for his studies. A purpose/goal-oriented driven relationship is not altogether a new concept. Similar selection patterns can be found in some arranged [heterosexual] marriages, but it is not often seen in other types of intimate relationships.<sup>90</sup> Pande (2014, p. 6), in an analysis on arranged marriages, describes how one of her Bangladeshi participants, Shabnam, had a desire to be modern, but knew that would be difficult within her culture where her parents would arrange a marriage for her. She was likewise aware that Bangladeshi men residing in Britain would often return to Bangladesh to find a wife. Shabnam left hints and spoke with a paternal aunt who carried social capital within her family to attempt to guide her arranged marriage toward a particular match as she viewed this as the way to become “modern”. Shabnam, though arguably limited in her relationship options, identified a partner based on her own personal goals. She structured her relationship as a tool much like how Robin’s relationships were similarly

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<sup>90</sup> Arranged marriages are culturally and historically variable. The comparison I am making in this section parallels those relationships in which women perceive themselves to be in a position of agency. The parallel is also to those arranged marriages in which both partners are choosing one another and agreeing to the match.

pragmatic. A key difference in their pragmatic approaches, however, was that Robin would often leave his relationships once his goal had been reached.

Robin's relationship model—and those like him—is thus not particular to asexuals,<sup>91</sup> but is less common. The first step to forming this type of relationship would be to outline a particular need or goal. Then it would often lead to an active identification of individuals who could meet that need or goal. Where the relationship model does deviate in Robin's case is that he saw his relationships ending once the function had been met. For example, upon completion of his class, his intimate relationship with his tutor served no further purpose and thus ended. Because the intention of the relationship is pragmatically based, the intimacy<sup>92</sup> is limited, which stifles the continued growth once the task/goal has been completed.

For other participants who used a similar model, the goal or need was only the foundation of their relationship(s). For instance, Kippa spoke at length during her interview about the subsequent emotional attachment she developed for her partner. This emotional attachment was what enabled the continuation of her relationship. It is worth noting, however, that Robin and Kippa had very different goals/needs. Kippa's pragmatic view related to fairly stable aspects of her partner (e.g. his height, strength) whereas Robin outlined short-term temporary goals.

A similar functional relationship model is one that develops out of support (giving, getting or both). These relationships began somewhat more impulsively in that my participants did not plan to find someone who needed support. These relationships were more opportunistic. Cavi (male, 39, American) explained:

I bonded with my female friend because I could tell she was in pain and needed someone to listen. [...] I had seen her waiting outside of the building before class a few times. I could tell she was in pain. [...] I approached her one day and we just started talking.

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<sup>91</sup> However, there may be an argument that pragmatic relationship formation in the current western cultural setting is atypical. It is also worth highlighting that for Robin, this practice is a feature of his sexual orientation whereas for Shabnam, this practice is a feature of her culture. If this distinction is emphasised, it could be argued that a pragmatic partnership then is a possible feature of an asexual identity and relationship practice, but is not true of all asexuals.

<sup>92</sup> It is possible that there is a connection between aromanticism and/or individuals seeking platonic intimate relationships and this type of relationship formation model.

Cavi identified an individual he saw in need. The emotional work prompted some intimate connections, which led to what Cavi defined as an intimate relationship. CS (male, 25, American) similarly explained finding a partner through giving support:

After a few months of supporting her through her situation at home [...] and through dealing with having been raped [...], I proved my unwavering loyalty to her, and she noticed. Almost two months after the supposed rape, she told me that I was the only man she felt comfortable around, and I told her how I felt about her. A week later, we agreed to start our relationship. (CS, male, 25, American)

This type of relationship may be more accessible to asexuals because it puts the focus on the emotional aspects of interactions instead of physical and behavioural aspects (where an asexual may feel more uncomfortable). It is unclear, however, as to why it is predominantly men who develop relationships out of this pattern of interaction—a pattern of choosing needy partners. It may reflect my mostly heteronormative sample in conjunction with Western expectations that men (van Hooff, 2013) hide their emotions. Thus many of my female heteroromantic participants would not have this pattern available to them. It could likewise relate to notions of the male being the active agent in initiating relationships, but (as will be seen later in this chapter) regarding participants who took an active role in initiating a relationship, gender was not a significant factor. I think it more likely relates to heteronormative expectations of the male being the active and often sexual agent, but because many asexuals do not emphasise sexual behaviours, asexual men find alternative routes to provide for their female partner and to engage.<sup>93</sup>

A third type of pragmatic relationship style is what I call relationship from proximity by intention. That is, there were two different ways individuals who found intimate partners due to proximity (e.g. working in a group together) approached having a relationship. The first was actively seeking out a partner and initiating contact as a consequence of proximity. The second was being the passive member. Out of a desire to find companionship in an intimate partner and often an inability to locate geographically close asexuals, some of my participants turned to their immediate environment to find an intimate partner. Finding a partner in proximity is one of the most common ways any

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<sup>93</sup> In my analysis of practices of physical intimacy (p. ##), I similarly find a practice of participating or doing things for one's partner, but in that instance, it was not specific to one gender/sex.

individual, no matter their sexual orientation, initiates an intimate relationship. Krakov (cisgender female, 24, Mexican), for instance, explained that she and her partner worked closely together for some time before starting an intimate relationship. Clarke (2006) reported that 70% of British employees have been in a relationship in the workplace. These relationships start from a point of geographical closeness that then develops into emotional connections. I noticed in my research that these relationships are often further supported by shared friendship networks. Orange (female, 28, Chinese-Filipino) detailed how her physical closeness and shared networks allowed her to find partners and develop an intimate relationship:

I met my partners while I was studying in the University [*sic*] and in Graduate [*sic*] school in the US. I met them in my classes and in my affiliations. I also had common friends with my partners, before we started a relationship. I have also noticed through my pattern that I become close with my partners during or after we work on a project.

Salvaggio et al. (2011, p. 910) classify this type of proximity as “functional proximity, or the degree to which coworkers can easily interact”. Salvaggio et al. (2011, p. 910) claim that “people who collaborate on a task may share a subjective experience of the workplace” and sharing that “subjective experience to a given stimuli” can generate an intimate closeness. This is even more common if, as in Orange’s case with her projects, individuals are participating in tasks that make them dependent on one another (Salvaggio et al., 2011, p. 927). Forced interdependence and functional proximity then becomes the base for an intimate relationship.

Pragmatic relationships, then, only prove successful long-term if the [shared] goal has the potential to move the relationship into increasing intimacy. Robin’s relationships were only short-term because the limited intimacy was such that the relationship was more dependent on the shared experience or goal. Once this experience was over or the goal had been met, the relationship lacked closeness sufficient to support it. The other types of pragmatic relationships could continue in the long-term but this was because they were oriented in such a way that intimacy could develop/grow. Part of this also relates to the types of goals/function sought. Relationships were more likely to continue when the goal/function was not central to the intimate relationship. However, aside for goal-oriented pragmatic relationships such as Robin, these practices are not specific to asexuals. Robin’s relationship style does

suggest a possible particular practice of one sub-group of asexuals who seek more platonic intimate relationships. Another possible feature of an asexual identity is the practice of locating intimate partners who one can emotionally support as a placeholder from heteronormative expectations of a sexual engagement. I only found this particularly relevant to my male participants, but later on will discuss similar practices that were common among the majority of my participants (in mixed relationships, especially). Along with those later findings, it is arguable that there is a practice of giving common to asexuals' intimate practices.

#### 4.3.2 Long-term friendships

Cynthia (female, agender, 30, Chinese) explained that ze identified partners through hir friendship group. For hir, relationships needed to “develop organically, starting from friends, without any further expectation”. Dora (female, demi-female, 20, Dutch) likewise noted: “The best relationships for me are those that have grown out of a good friendship”. Intimate relationships quite often developed from friendship groups, no matter the desired orientation. Diamond (2003, p. 174), from an evolutionary psychology perspective,<sup>94</sup> even proposes that “individuals should be capable of experiencing romantic love for individuals to whom they are not typically sexually oriented”, likely to occur as a result of “high proximity or physical contact over sustained periods of time” as would occur in a friendship group. When heterosexuals were selecting a partner, Couch (2008, p. 273) found participants were looking for individuals they “clicked”<sup>95</sup> with and found that often occurred between friends whether the individuals developed an intimate relationship. The intimate potential, however, provided more readily available intimate partners. Thus, it was not surprising that friendship networks were frequently cited as a way in which my participants found [potential] intimate partners. However, I noted a positive correlation between those who formed relationships through friendship and those who discussed a passive role in relationship formation, which presented primarily through an extensive discussion about how individuals did not seek relationships and then was again mirrored among those

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<sup>94</sup> Some evolutionary psychologists ground intimate relationships in parent-child attachment wherein individuals form, seek and/or maintain intimate relationships through an adaption of this attachment style. See Diamond, 2003. Although evolutionary psychology is highly problematic, the perspective offers different ways for thinking about biological structures and their relationship(s) to emotions, memories and practices.

<sup>95</sup> “Clicking” refers to getting along; work well together (Couch, 2008)

whose proximity to others developed into relationships by chance and through the initiation of the intimate partner.

In response to how my participants sought out relationships, many stated that they did not *seek* intimate relationships despite desiring them and yet went on to explain in other questions how they ended up with their intimate partner(s). This contradiction may partly be in response to my word choice during the interview process (“sought”/“seek”), or it may relate to how my participants sometimes framed themselves in passive roles within the formation of their intimate relationship(s). Caf (female, 21, American), for instance, explained:

I don't really “seek out” relationships. All of the relationships I have entered began as friendships with people I met at school, sometimes very long friendships, and almost always it was the other person who initiated the relationships/“asked me out”. I tend not to notice when someone is interested in me, but since we already have a good friendship I am almost always willing to give a romantic relationship a shot.

Of those participants who discussed *not* seeking a partner, there was no clear understanding as to why. It is possible that it relates partly to the previously discussed notion that there were no suitable [asexual] partners readily available. Caf explained that she did not notice her possible partners, at least not until they presented themselves as potential, but further, the action of the liking was described in a very one-directional approach. Caf tended not to notice when someone was interested in *her*, but is not clear about her own affections. There is a type of passive indifference to the intimate relationships themselves. It is at least worth noting that this passive approach to intimate relationships does not necessarily coincide with a refusal to be in a relationship. So although Caf did not recognise potential partners until they presented themselves, she was still willing to enter into a romantic relationship with them.

Caf did, however, note that if her current relationship were to end, she “would begin actively seeking [a relationship] instead of waiting for a relationship to come to [her], since now [she had] decided to narrow [her] playing field quite a bit”. This change from the passive to the active coincided with beginning to identify as asexual. Dora (female, demi-female, 20, Dutch) similarly mentioned that she did not seek out partners. Both Caf and Dora were in relationships that came out of long-term friendships when they first started to identify as asexual. It is possible, then, that this

passive framework might in some way be related to the time at which an individual started to identify as asexual and how they come to understand their identification. For Caf, identification meant a shift in the way she went about partner identification from a passive to an active participant. An asexual social identity may be what allows individuals to move from the passive to the active agent.<sup>96</sup>

The other typical phenomenon that came out of a more passive approach to dating was a conversation about how friendships seemed to flow “naturally” into a perceived relationship, but neither party ever clarified the status of their relationship. For instance, Ghost (male, 24, American) explained:

As bizarre as it may sound, we never “officially” asked each other out or approached one another for a relationship. I never considered her a girlfriend and vice versa. We always hung out and slowly day by day, we became more comfortable with each other. She would rest her head on my shoulders, want to hold my hand, take naps with me, etc.

Tori (female, neutrois/non-gender, 26, Jewish) similarly noted:

We never passed through the “dating” stage of the relationship. As I’ve said, we were best friends in the high school [...], and some day just began to spend more time with one another than with other friends.

Both Ghost and Tori’s relationships saw gradual shifts in their friendships as they transitioned into perceived intimate relationships (although Ghost rejected the term “girlfriend”). Neither party took an active role in their relationship(s), and both transitioned without much discussion of the relationships themselves. For Tori, this occurred prior to hir identification as asexual. Like Caf, Tori went on to note how, with time and hir emerging identification as asexual, the relationship transitioned into an open relationship and Tori and hir partner began to communicate actively about their intimate relationship once again point to active agency within the intimate relationship resulting from an asexual identity.

Some of my participants were not long-term friends with individuals, but instead met their partners through chance or short-term encounters. Sam (female, 20, Canadian)

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<sup>96</sup> This again relates back to having access to the appropriate performances discussed in the previous chapter.



met her partner through her university's newspaper. Shry (male, 27, American) found his partners at his place of employment and explained: "I am fairly certain that it was an issue of proximity, and I was interested in them mostly because I was around them all the time. Also both of them approached me". Orange (female, 28, Chinese-Filipino) noted how she and her husband used to "bump into each other in the different organizations" before becoming close when he noticed her in distress and supported her.

It would appear, then, that among my participants who entered into a relationship through long-term friendship, there was a narrative of a lack of initial partner identification: a general passiveness. There was a repeated pattern of the intimate partner being the initiator or both parties taking a passive role. There also appears to be a strong connection between this passive intimate relationship initiation and whether an individual had yet identified as asexual, though this was not the case for all of my participants. This passivity shifted into a more active engagement in partner identification as individuals adopted an asexual identity, with a more forward declaration of wants, needs and interests specific to the type of asexuality the individual identifies as (i.e. indifferent, repulsed) and its related practices.

#### *4.3.3 Online networks*

One of the primary spaces my participants found partners if they were intentionally seeking an intimate relationship was on dating websites and online networks. These online spaces included social networks such as Facebook, forums like AVEN and dating websites, both asexual-specific and general ones. As a previous user of [www.okcupid.com](http://www.okcupid.com),<sup>97</sup> I hypothesised that my participants would make more use of asexual-friendly and asexual-specific online sites, but interestingly, this was not necessarily the case (and sometimes the opposite was true).

In a study that primarily focused on heterosexuals, Couch (2008, p. 271) found that the reasons individuals used online dating methods varied, but "included seeking a soul mate, seeking sex, looking for fun, relaxation, to ease boredom, or because it seemed like an easy way to meet people". Many of my participants looked to online dating platforms and/or virtual relationships but for somewhat different reasons. Although looking for a partner, many used the space for additional reasons. For

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<sup>97</sup> I later removed my account on OKCupid and instead started using Plenty of Fish after hearing some of my asexual friends finding success on the site thanks to the way it matches based more on personality characteristics. On OKCupid I often received messages from people using my asexual identity to talk about sex or to persuade me to have sex, to test my sexual orientation. I did not have this issue on Plenty of Fish, however, and I am now in a new relationship with a heterosexual partner.

instance, as previously discussed, asexuals are geographically spaced from one another making it difficult to find and form a relationship with a partner (asexual or otherwise) who suits their intimate preferences. Thus, some of my participants turned to online dating platforms to find connections with other asexuals and develop relationships much in the way Tikkanen and Ross (2000, p. 606) found that geographically isolated gay men saw the internet as an “advantage”: “social [...] networks may be a complement to the networks that the men have (or lack) in real life”. Shry (male, 27, American), for instance, discussed his participation in brony culture—a community he can only really find online.<sup>98</sup> Through his experiences online and in this space, he had formed several virtual relationships. He argued:

I have come to the conclusion that we are living in a time when we are likely to meet people that we are closest to online, just because we are able to meet people who are more in line with our own ideals because no longer are we limited to friends just based on proximity.

In Shry’s views, these online spaces provide access to intimate partners that would otherwise be unreachable. The internet, then, is a space which offers asexuals the opportunity to meet intimate partners in line with their ideals.<sup>99</sup> Shry also suggested that these relationships could be deemed equally important and valuable as offline relationships; that online intimate relationships are sustainable and *real*.<sup>100</sup>

Cynthia (female, agender, 30, Chinese) cited a different reason for some asexuals use of the internet:

It’s much easier for me to meet partners online than in real life (I met all my three partners online), because of my introversion, and because it’s easier to find people who share my relationship views online.

Although online spaces did not work for him, Bryan (male, 30, American) also connected this dating method to his personality:

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<sup>98</sup> “Brony culture” is a reference to men who watch My Little Pony.

<sup>99</sup> Given the access all of my participants had to the internet, it was surprising to find that despite this access, many still felt they were unlikely to meet an asexual partner and compromised on their partner’s sexual orientation.

<sup>100</sup> Shry’s views also support the importance of having similarities in terms of interests and characteristics as discussed in the first half of this chapter.

I'm fairly introverted and so I didn't have many opportunities to meet new people. [...] I made a brief attempt on OK Cupid, but none of my suggested matches seemed interesting. I also made an account on Ace Book, and this resulted in one case where I'd correspond with someone for a while, but nothing came from this.

Ben-Ze'ev (2004) reasons that most people are more forward online and find it easier to be more sociable, which makes it an ideal space for individuals, like Cynthia and Bryan, who are more introverted. These spaces provide a more comfortable opportunity for finding intimate partners. The nature of online discussions also allows introverted individuals to control the frequency and level of social interaction: with a few clicks, unwanted social contacts can be removed or evaded. Where these relationships tend to fail is the struggle to move them offline, during which time introverted individuals may find it difficult to continue to form meaningful connections and physical elements may be [unwantingly] introduced into the relationship.

It is worth noting that Cynthia (female, agender, 30, Chinese) did not find online dating helpful, but she explained that this was because online dating is much more "goal-oriented", which is partly why some of my participants *chose* to try it. Cynthia was speaking specifically about online dating websites (e.g., Match.com, OKCupid, Asexualitic, AceBook). These types of dating websites are designed for those who are currently seeking relationships, which can make them more goal-oriented in that the intention is to find a partner as opposed to letting relationships develop organically. All members of an interaction communicate normally only to assess if they would be a good match whereas relationships that develop outside of these websites generally start off around the context of friendship or shared goals and develop more "organically".

There were two types of online dating websites that my participants used: asexual-specific websites and general websites. Asexual-specific dating websites included predominantly Acebook and Asexualitic.<sup>101</sup> These websites provide opportunities for asexuals to find other asexual partners.<sup>102</sup> Participants who previously

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<sup>101</sup> AVEN ([www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) was also sometimes used as a dating platform, though this behaviour is deterred by moderators. Individuals would utilise the chat and/or private messenger to get to know other members more intimately.

<sup>102</sup> These websites can and sometimes do include demisexuals and grey-asexuals. Demisexuals are individuals who lack sexual attraction until they have emotionally and/or romantically bonded with someone. Grey-asexuals are individuals who fluctuate between being asexual and sexual or are not quite sure where they fall on the spectrum.

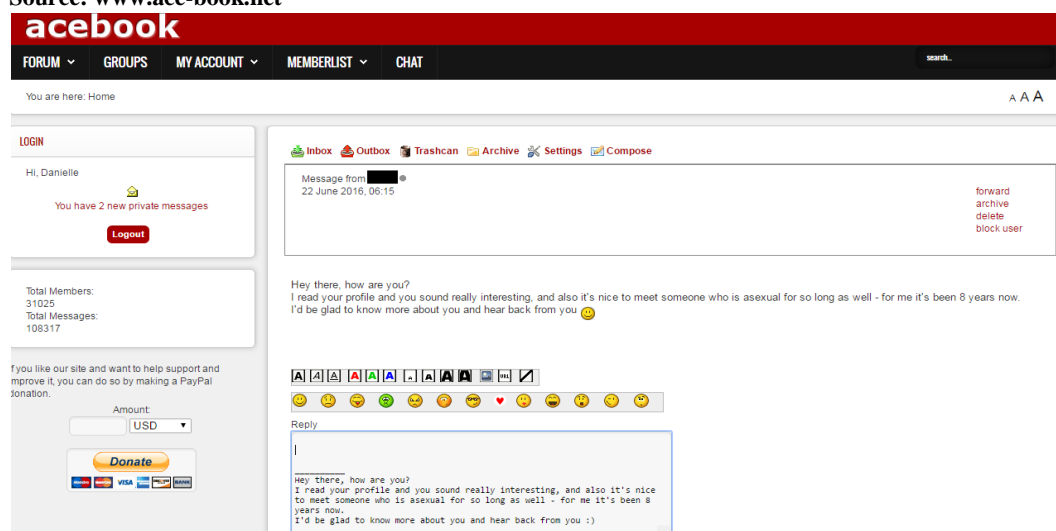
mentioned wanting an asexual as their ideal partner would sometimes use one of these websites, though for some reason, they did not always. When discussing how she thought her dating practices might change after identifying as asexual, Caf (female, 21, American) explained:

If my current relationship were to end, I think I would begin actively seeking instead of waiting for a relationship to come to me, since now I have decided to narrow my playing field quite a bit. I may even employ online resources such as Acebook to Asexualitic so that I know I am finding an ace partner.

On Acebook (www.ace-book.net), users create profiles, detailing some of what they are looking for, provide brief descriptions about themselves and can include a picture. Then they can talk on the website's forums or send private messages. Members can browse for matches in their area or more broadly. It is unclear as to why this website is not more widely used. It may relate to issues with the server as Acebook's website used to crash fairly often. Likewise, because Acebook's domain name is so similar to Facebook, when searching for the website on major search engines, it can be more difficult to find. Google, for instance, searches for "Facebook" processing the search as if there was a typo and users have to click for it to search as intended. Acebook's appearance and system is very archaic as well, which makes it less appealing (see image).

**Image: Acebook's messaging system**

**Source: www.ace-book.net**



Used more often by my participants, Asexualitic (www.asexualitic.com) is designed in a very similar way. It provides a space for creating a profile and searching for possible matches, but makes users pay. The layout is similar stylistically to general dating websites that some participants reported trying before, which may have made it

feel more familiar. One of my participants, Geeske (female, 33, Dutch), who used Asexualitic explained how it facilitated her meeting her intimate partner:

On the dating site where we met (Asexualitic), many asexuals indicate how far they would like to go in a relationship, as far as intimate behaviour is concerned. People indicate if they like holding hands, hugging and kissing, for instance. By doing that, intimate issues are negotiated right away, which will prevent problems later on in a relationship.

The website then allows asexuals to focus their search on other asexuals and provides a space to further clarify boundaries and relationship ideals prior to physically meeting.

General dating websites, such as Match.com, were less likely to be utilised, but still explored more frequently than I expected. The problem with these websites is they attract unwanted matches. Although many participants on these websites are looking for an intimate partner, increasingly individuals are using them for local quick meet-ups and one-night-stands. The websites continue to add options to clarify interests, such as “What are you looking for?”, to further facilitate individuals finding partners with whom they can have short-term relationships and/or one-night sexual encounters. When searching for a long-term partner on these sites, my participants, particularly my female participants, expressed receiving more sexual attention than they wanted despite being clear about what they were [not] looking for.

When creating a profile, there are three primary aspects: “(a) closed-ended questions that require short, factual answers, (e.g., statements about height, age, and occupation); (b) an open-ended question where users write about themselves ‘in my own words’; and (c) photographs” (Toma and Hancock, 2012, p. 79). When completing the first section, asexuals may become disillusioned with these websites as often “asexual” is not offered under sexual orientation. One website that does recognise asexuality as a sexual orientation is Ok Cupid ([www.okcupid.com](http://www.okcupid.com)). Users are able to search for asexual-only matches as well. Another decent website that appeals to asexuals is Plenty of Fish ([pof.com](http://pof.com)) because it focuses on personality tests to match you with similar people, appealing to asexual practices for locating a partner based on personality traits rather than physical interest(s). Sophia (female, 26, British) found her partner using this website and explained the process she went through to create a profile:

Online dating seemed to offer the opportunity to take things slowly, analyse my options and so on. Previously I'd just met people in social situations or through friends, but I hadn't sought out a relationship as such prior to the one I'm in now. They always just 'happened'. So anyways, I posted a profile online. I was careful in choosing which photos of myself I used. I made sure the photos only showed my face, not my body, because I didn't want to attract anyone who was more interested in my breasts than what I have to say. I sometimes dress up, do my hair, put on a lot of make up. But I used natural photos. Again, I wanted my real self to come across, and being sexy isn't part of that for me. In my personal description I wrote about my work, hobbies, etc., and stated that I wanted to find somebody on my intellectual wavelength.

Sophia intentionally designed her profile in a way that she believed would not come across as sexy and directly manipulated her content to try to create that impression. Couch (2008, p. 273) found that "the importance of physical attractiveness and establishing a rapport was common to most interviews". Participants were looking for individuals they had a "chemical reaction" with (Couch, 2008, p. 273). Sophia however attempted to minimise her sexual appeal in order to reduce the likelihood of finding partners at a "chemical" level and instead, when provided with a space to articulate her interests, specified a desire for finding an intellectual match. Sophia actively negotiated the space to articulate her particular interests in finding a non-sexual and/or less physically intimate partner.

Sophia's direct engagement with the content enabled her to find a partner that suited her, but it is worth noting that there is something of a gender bias in online dating platforms: there is a tendency for men to seek out women more than women to seek out men and possibly relates back to notions of masculinity within the romantic public story.<sup>103</sup> This bias is consistent with my finding that it is mostly female participants who report online dating platforms as useful. Sophia appeared to take a more forward role and sorted through her matches rather than waiting to be contacted. She explained her partner selection online as follows:

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<sup>103</sup> As was noticed earlier in this section when my male participants mentioned giving as a way of demonstrating forward interest, here again is a possible sex difference wherein men are expected to make the first move. This can be difficult for asexual male participants as it can lead to increased risk of rejection. Asexual women on the other hand can state their identity on their profile and have men choose whether they want to message them. This is a more passive process, but is a common practice.

I met my partner online. When browsing through my ‘matches’, I instantly skipped all the men who were trying to look sexy in their photos or had photos showing them with other women, or drinking/partying. Those aspects of a photograph put me off in a huge way because for me, somebody who makes their ‘sexiness’ their primary identity indicator is threatening. It gives me the sense that I couldn’t trust them, and whatever else might be attractive about their profile, that instinct stops me in my tracks. If I got flirtatious messages, I ignored them by default for the same reasons. I wanted to be with somebody who was interested in getting to know my mind first, because I’m only comfortable with flirting once I’ve started to trust the person.

What is interesting to note about Sophia’s process, which was reiterated by a few participants, is that although she did not wish to be perceived sexually and through her physical appearance, she relied quite heavily on evaluating a partner through his own physical appearance. Ellison et al. (2011, p. 55) note that “participants generally accepted the use of euphemistic terms, such as ‘curvy’, and interpreted them in light of community-specific shared understandings”. Sophia accepted the euphemistic terms and images, but used them as means to measure an intimate partner’s expected sexual motivations. Although I previously did not find a distinct aesthetic preference among my participants and I questioned why these cultural messages were not as present, Sophia’s behaviours suggest that this may be more complicated than I previously thought: asexuals may see physical features (and particularly how a person takes care of themselves) as a measure of how close they are to the “public story” and thus how likely they are/might be [not] open to their asexual identity.

When using online dating methods, it is typical to start by pinpointing a few possible matches and to gradually get closer to one or more prospective partners (Couch, 2008, p. 274). However, I noticed a tendency for my participants to fixate on one person at a time. The conversation then tended to move into other platforms, such as private messaging. Geeske (female, 33, Dutch), for example, discussed her focus on a single person and how their communication transitioned:

My partner and I did not really flirt on the dating site. We sent each other e-mails in order to get to know each other a bit better, and to find out if our personalities did or did not match. After a while, when we had found out that our personalities matched, we decided to meet each other and to send each other

photos, so that we could recognise each other. That date went well, so we decided to see each other more often, and now we live together.

Ben-Ze'ev (2004, p. 28) argues that online communication provides temporal immediacy which develops a sense of emotional immediacy: "people can express their spontaneous, authentic emotional reactions, as is done in offline relationships". This then progresses along "a typical development [model] of cyber-love is as follows: public discourse, private emails or private chatting, sending pictures, telephoning, and arranging face-to-face meetings" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004, p. 155). As communication continues to develop, individuals found themselves in heightened emotional states and increased closeness that then transitioned to a desire for face-to-face meetings. Platypus's (male, 31, American) experience mirrored Ben-Ze'ev's model:

I met [intimate partner] through an online game called Cthulhu Nation. It was love at first type. After we started talking to each other in-game for a little while, it went to phone calls, and shortly thereafter I planned to move down here and make her my wife. It sounds simple, and it really was. We just clicked that easily.

Similarly, Puppy (female, 28, Finnish) described meeting her partner:

We knew of each other on AVEN for a while until a mutual friend pointed out that we actually lived quite close to each other. We started to talk on MSN and found out we shared a common interest: dogs.

Puppy then goes on to detail how her partner and she met when volunteering at an animal shelter.

While most of the discussed intimate relationships that related to online dimensions resulted in a face-to-face meeting, a few of my participants explained similar patterns of finding an intimate partner, but maintaining that relationship(s) entirely online. Earlier, I noted how Shry had some relationships that were purely virtual. Cynthia likewise discussed an online triad she was part of. The triad was a three-person online, intimate relationship, which reflects her polyamorous lifestyle. Cynthia envisioned the relationship moving offline at some point, but explained that all members of the triad were pleased with the emotional intimacy they shared and were in



no particular rush to transition the relationship to offline. This intimacy was created almost entirely through verbal/chat communication and did not include often cyber behaviours, such as “virtual cuddling” or “cybersex” and was found to be very meaningful.

In summary, online platforms can provide comfortable avenues for asexuals to actively seek out potential partners, especially other asexuals. Most of these relationships progressed from larger platforms, such as dating or gaming websites, to private communication, offline communication and then face-to-face meetings. The online space was more comfortable because of the control it provided individuals both socially and in selecting a match who suits their asexual preferences. Relationships entirely online I found to be meaningful and sometimes the only type of relationship a person desired. Online spaces allow for asexuals to focus more on personalities and less on bodies/physical attractiveness, which is consistent with their ideal partner preferences and partnering practices.

#### *4.4 Conclusion: Reframing the same old question*

“Are you sure you haven’t met the right partner?” they ask. They are really asking me to have sex with other people and often themselves; they are really asking this question to challenge my indifference and asexual identity, but really, they’re right to ask it because when thinking about it, the answer is: “Maybe not”.

In this chapter, I established that the “right person” was understood by my participants in a non-sexual and often even non-physical way. The main instance where the body mattered in finding an intimate partner was for those participants who sought to procreate and wanted biological children. Occasionally participants discussed an aesthetic attraction, but this was largely secondary—or even tertiary—to other features. In fact, I found that aesthetics may be a means through which asexuals measured a person’s possible openness to their asexuality, based on how much they appeared to participate in stereotypical expressions of maleness and femaleness. I found that gender held relevance largely only when it introduced a shared experience, particularly in regards to non-normative practices that did not directly challenge the HPS, but did function outside of it. These participants sometimes sought individuals who identified as non-binary or genderqueer, which they connected with a shared experience of othering, but this was a preference again not rooted in the physical body but in intellectual and/or emotional understanding. Like with aesthetic preferences, my

participants demonstrated a pattern of seeking individuals who resisted the cultural messages of sexual assumption.

Sex preferences sometimes were connected to sexual orientation preferences, but I found that of the 19 who preferred a particular sexual orientation, over half preferred asexual. Again, this preference was detached from a sex and/or body preference. In fact, some participants reported preferring particular orientations that implied the absence of particular body types rather than a preference so as to feel less pressured about sex[ual behaviours]. I did, however, notice that this preference was often compromised. For some reason, being in an intimate relationship was more important than this preference. I hypothesised that this related to messages from the HPS to seek out an intimate relationship and maintain a monogamous and permanent relationship from thereon.

But, thinking back to the question of finding the “right partner”, where are asexuals looking? My participants sought intimate partners within pragmatic and proximity settings, friendship groups and online. Pragmatic relationships were functionally-driven relationships that often were entered for short-term purposes or goals (e.g. moving to a new city). Sometimes these relationships were long-term, especially when they related to proximity, such as sharing a common workplace. Finding a partner within a friendship group often was accidental rather than intentional. These were relationships that over time progressed from friendships to something more serious for the individuals. While these settings were not overly unusual when compared to how sexuals find intimate partners, I found that asexuals often took an inactive role in relationship formation. For those asexuals who did take a more active role in locating an intimate partner, they turned to online communities and websites and often because of the way it removed the body from the relationship-forming process. When thinking more closely about these active roles, however, it is worth noting that these experiences were reported mostly from my female participants who—as discussed—were often contacted by people in the community rather than messaging people themselves. So although there was an active search in the sense that participants made profiles, this then reverted slightly to a more passive role. Participants still had agency, though, as they could choose who to [not] respond to.

With discussion around the body—and [penetrative] sex in particular—removed from the primary ways asexuals talked about their intimate relationships, other forms of intimacy became the focal point(s). In his discussion on adult intimate love, Fletcher (2002) argues that people vary on how much they value traits [or features], but in my research I noticed a pattern. Particular traits, such as intelligence, were repeatedly

mentioned. When discussing ideal personalities of partners, intelligence and/or intellectual conversationalist(s) was frequently discussed and sometimes at great length (over the spread of multiple lines). Many of my participants saw intelligence as significant for building intimacy. For example, I found that desire for an intelligent intimate partner was reflected in high levels of desire for intellectual intimacy and intellectual intimate practices. This was one area that was very specific to asexuality and thus what I now classify as an asexual intimate practice. In the next chapter, I will discuss these types of intimacies, looking specifically at how these partner selection practices translated into intimate practices.

## Chapter 5: Transgressing[?] heteronormativity: Asexual intimate relationships and heteronormativity

“Are you falling asleep on me?”

“Of course not,” I replied. He shifted onto his side, propping onto his elbow.

“Don’t stop. Keep going.”

He leaned his weight back against me and resumed.

“Harder,” I insisted.

We stayed like that. Our breathing synchronized to the hypnotic rhythm of his pace. I figured it wouldn’t last, but I intended to take in all that he was willing to give me.

“We’ve been doing this for longer than we had sex,” he whined, stopping again, the hair brush conveniently falling to the floor.

I reached over and handed it back to him. “Sex was just the foreplay. Now brush.”

## 5.1 Introduction

When I entered my first long term intimate relationship, I had to go through a second period of “coming out”. Because my relationship looked very heterosexual—or at least heteronormative—people were of the belief that I was no longer an asexual. However, I knew I was an asexual and I also knew that although my relationship was very heteronormative publicly, my perception of it and my experience of its related practices were not [always] normative. My experience raised questions regarding the connection between heteronormativity and asexuality. I was curious first about the types of intimate relationships other asexuals entered. Were they equally seemingly heteronormative? Was there something specifically asexual about them that pointed to a particular social practice? Was there a transgressive possibility as posited by other researchers? That is, could asexual intimate relationships offer a shift in how intimate relationships are practiced in the aforementioned [heteronormative] sexual public story (HPS)?

Beasley et al.<sup>104</sup> (2012, p. 85) claim that “[a]lternative sexualities, deemed queer, have now become the site of transgressive, exciting, and pleasurable sex, and are construed as invariably politically labile”. Beasley et al. (2012) locate this fixation on alternative sexualities as the site of transgression as a by-product of the pro-sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s. However, in my research on asexuality, I too found an articulation of asexual research as a transgressive cornerstone. For example, Sundrud (2011, p. iv) discusses her thesis as the advancement of the claim that “asexuality is a social identity by which asexuals narrate their past within a heteronormative society and envision a queer future”. Despite work such as Jackson (2008), Jackson and Scott (2010), Barker and Gabb (2016) which establishes a practice of [hetero]sexuality that is focused on the everyday and is not a reflection of the sexual imperative at the core of the sexual public story, a new—and sometimes the only—way of envisioning intimate relationships continues to be argued from the position of alternative and/or “queer” sexualities opposed to heterosexuality or all sexualities collectively. By researching asexuality and exploring these questions, I am seemingly complicit in this erred thinking. While I would agree that alternative sexualities are worthwhile, I do not see them as the only

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<sup>104</sup> I rely quite heavily on Beasley et al. (2016) because their work was a recent comprehensive analysis that offered a clear separation in understandings of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. They challenge the “monolithic” views of heterosexuality to offer the possibility of a more nuanced view of heterosexuality.

site of transgressive potential. What is advantageous about asexuality, however, is that—as will be further explained later in this chapter—it can straddle practices within multiple orientations<sup>105</sup> as asexuals generally enter intimate relationships with non-asexuals. This means that studying the transgressive potential of asexuality is exceptional given its ability to be both “alternative” and heteronormative. Further, Beasley et al. (2012, p. 57) argue that “in order to explore [a] positive potential [for sexually intimate relationships], it is important initially to clarify why and how pleasure<sup>106</sup>, rather than, say, desire, might be a crucial site for rethinking heterosexuality”. Despite their work being on theorising heterosexuality and heteronormativity, I raise their argument because of its relevance to the way asexuals position their own pleasure. Asexuality’s distinct near erasure of sexual attraction—which is often referred to as sexual desire if taken from a behavioural stance—is the first step to exploring “a positive potential”. With the removal of a focus on desire, asexuals’ intimate practices can be analysed to locate sites of pleasure,<sup>107</sup> offering new ways of imagining practices and occasionally new practices altogether within intimate relationships and the wider public story.

Of course, that was my theoretical expectation. Instead I found asexuality was inconsistent in its practices, but (1) offered examples of different ways alternative sexualities are complicit with the HPS, (2) was sometimes alternative and then, most importantly, (3) I found some instances where asexuality occupied both spaces of [hetero]normative and non-normative, which could offer a new way of thinking about and doing intimate relationships. I utilised Beasley et al.’s (2012) definitions of subversion and transgression to analyse the participants’ behaviours and highlight examples relevant to each category. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 5) define subversion as “a reflexive undermining of heteronormativity that can produce challenges to or shifts in the norm, even if these do not appear to be radical”, and “transgression refers to straying on the surface rather than any deliberate effort to undermine”. To transgress often lacks intention; it is described as drifting away from the “path” before going back (Beasley et al., 2012). I understand heteronormativity as the culmination of practices that posits a

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<sup>105</sup> Toward the end of this chapter I discuss how this model for categorising practices is not useful for capturing the complexity of the intimate experience and actually limits it. I describe asexuality as straddling in this instance, however, because I am analysing against a framework that divides intimate relationships generally by sexual orientation and seemingly related intimate practices (e.g. heterosexuals having penetrative sex).

<sup>106</sup> Such a framework, then, would force a resistance of normative perceptions of sexuality as pleasure is a varied and subjective experience. Its dynamic nature removes constructions of sexuality and perceptions of intimate practices as fixed sites of performance.

<sup>107</sup> When I suggest a framework around “pleasure”, I aim to include non-sexual pleasure as well.

gender binary with related gender roles and a heterosexual intimate relationship designed around the [generally] male orgasm and this is what comprises the [heteronormative] public story referred to throughout. I recognise, however, that heteronormativity is not always synonymous with heterosexuality and did my best to explore any usage of the term “heterosexuality” within interviews to better understand if my participants meant heteronormativity.

## 5.2 *Changing the name of the game: Types of intimate relationships*

When examining the heteronormative; asexual-specific; and transgressive or subversive practices of my participants, I identified four types of relationships within which these practices occurred: mixed, platonic, asexual-asexual and polyamorous.<sup>108</sup> A mixed relationship (e.g., asexual-heterosexual, asexual-homosexual) was the most common type of relationship among my participants. At the time of the interview, 18 reported being in some form of mixed relationship with the majority being an asexual-heterosexual intimate relationship. The majority of those who identified as an indifferent asexual (apathetic toward sex/sexual interactions) fell into this category. These relationships reportedly encompassed the greatest amount of relationship work, requiring more compromise and difficulties balancing the varying needs, often with higher costs for the asexual partner.

Diamond (2003, p. 173) argues that “the processes underlying affectional bonding are not intrinsically oriented toward other-gender or same-gender partners”, meaning that sexual orientation does not necessarily point to who individuals fall in love with. However, research suggests that love may not be enough for a mixed relationship to survive. Isay (1998) interviewed 16 homosexual men who had previously been married to women and had since divorced. Isay’s (1998, p. 424) participants sometimes recognised their homosexuality, much like my asexual participants, and despite the mixed status would “choose to marry anyway”, particularly for social, heteronormative reasons: “They may want to live a conventional, heterosexual life because of its relative ease, comfort, and social respectability; they may marry because of a desire to have children and the conviction that marriage and family are in the best interests of these children; they may wish to please parents”. Isay (1998, p. 425) found

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<sup>108</sup> Because each of these intimate relationship types had a particular set of practices despite often straddling different positions of heteronormativity, asexual-specific identity and transgressive/subversiveness, I wanted to include a brief overview of each to properly introduce some of these differences.

that “most of the homosexual men [he interviewed were] able to have sex with their wives, albeit without much passion” (Isay, 1998, p. 425). With time, the participants reported increased feelings of anxiety and depression, with sex being experienced as “work”, causing most to terminate the relationship, though some did stay (Isay, 1998, p. 425). This narrative is very similar to the narratives described in the first analysis chapter (e.g. Sophia when she called performing sexually a chore). These behaviours are performed at a cost to many asexuals with varying experiences of benefits (if any). They were most often a site of heteronormative practice as will be seen.

I apply the term “platonic intimate relationships” to a relationship classification that is different from platonic friendships and friends-with-benefits relationships. While material from both can be useful for understanding platonic intimate relationships, neither fully capture what is happening in these relationships. Messman et al. (2000) investigated the nature of and maintenance behaviours within [cross-sex] platonic friendships. Individuals within these friendships participated in many maintenance behaviours that are similar to those in an intimate relationship: plans for contact and future gatherings, “openness”, “positivity”, “shared activity”, “advice” giving and self-disclosure (Messman et al., 2000, p. 76). They noted, however, that the “motives for maintaining the platonic nature of opposite-sex friendships substantially affect strategies to maintain those relationships”. That is, if the reason for remaining platonic was to safeguard the friendship (e.g., “I don’t want to lose a good friend”), then Messman et al. (2000, p. 89) found that this “positively predicted use of Openness, Positivity, Share activity, and Support, and it was negatively associated with Avoidance”. If there was a noted lack of attraction as the reason for remaining platonic, the friendship was largely void of flirting (Messman et al., 2000, p. 89). Where this differs from platonic intimate relationships is first that these relationships are not marked by strong interdependence. Parks and Floyd (1996, p. 102) in a study aimed to define closeness and intimacy within platonic friendships found that none of their respondents associated friendship “closeness with interdependence”. Interdependence is what moves a platonic friendship to a platonic intimate relationship where individuals rely on one another (or multiple others in cases of polyamorous platonic intimate relationships) to meet their social and emotional needs. Another difference is the marked absence of sexual and most physical behaviour within platonic intimate relationships. Although a platonic friendship may not be built around or with the intention for sexual relations, Afifi and Faulkner (2000, p. 217) found that “[51%] of [their] sample reported having ‘had sex’ with an opposite-sex friend with whom they had no intentions of dating at the time of the sexual activity”.



These were friends with whom the participants reported having a close platonic friendship. A platonic intimate relationship would likely exclude these interactions as a matter of point (negotiated early on) or, at the very least, would function with a clear understanding of [often limited] permitted behaviours.

Platonic intimate relationships are similarly different from friends-with-benefits. Platonic intimate relationships as experienced by my participants included very few—and rarely sexual—physical behaviours. If sexual behaviours are introduced into the relationship, it is classified as a friends-with-benefits relationship (FWBR). However, partners in both types of these relationships outline clear guidelines/“rules” within their relationships that are not found in their platonic friendships. Hughes et al. (2005, p. 61) found that FWBR partners established rules along seven general categories that “encompassed relational issues, such as attending to the friendship and maintaining the secrecy of the FWBR, to rules regarding the transient nature of the relationship, to rules suggesting that participants actually negotiate a rule structure for the relationship. The most commonly suggested rules were those for emotions and communication” in which the expression of emotions was restricted. A platonic intimate relationship, on the other hand, heavily depends on the expression of emotions and open communication about the limitations on behaviour. Thus, although both types of relationships clarify boundaries within the relationships, they vary on those boundaries and their particular exclusions.

There has been little focus on platonic intimate relationships in academic research as I am classifying them to date (2016), and there tends to be uncertainty around what is meant by this term. Further, I found that there was uncertainty among my participants as to whether their [platonic intimate] relationships could be categorised as intimate despite them experiencing the relationships as such. For instance, the majority of individuals in a platonic intimate relationship initially did not participate in my survey until someone on the AVEN forums (where I posted about the research) asked me to clarify how I viewed “intimate relationships”. Once I clarified that I did not specifically mean sexual intimacy or romantic intimacy and allowed for an open interpretation, I saw an immediate increase in the number of participants who said they were in platonic intimate relationships. Although this points to a particular heteronormative view of intimate relationships, their practices are non-normative and offered transgressive, if not subversive, potential.

Very little research has been done on asexuals in relationships as of April 2016 and even less analysis is available on asexuals in intimate relationships with other

asexuals. The lack of data is more likely to be the result of research in asexuality still being in its infancy. Brotto et al. (2010, p. 603), one group of researchers who have looked at asexuals' intimate relationships, found among their asexual participants that of "those who were currently in a relationship, the relationship length was usually less than one year, and this did not differ by sex", but they did not break this data down into categories of intimate relationship types nor by the sexual orientations of asexuals' partners. There is some suggestion in the literature that asexuals often share similar relationship goals as found in platonic intimate relationships (companionship),<sup>109</sup> but may include more romantic and/or physical intimacy in their intimate relationships. In a follow-up study, Brotto et al. (2010, p. 610) found among their asexual participants that "several reported wanting the closeness, companionship, intellectual, and emotional connection that comes from romantic relationships, and in this regard, they were similar to sexual individuals who desire closeness and intimacy". In an outline of her relationship goals, Geeske (female, female, 33, Dutch) stressed the similarity between her relationship and those of other sexual orientations. She explained:

Just like people who have different sexual orientations, I also want to share my life with somebody. I do not want to live alone for the rest of my life. I long for companionship, someone to trust and who loves me, and who can trust me and who I love in return.

In their second study, Brotto et al. (2010) grouped their participants according to the sexual orientations of their partners and the resulting relationship. Those asexual participants in an intimate relationship with an asexual partner "talked about the advantage of not having to contend with 'the messiness' of relationships. They reported being able to be naked and physically close to their partners without the pressure or expectation that it would lead to intercourse" (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 612). Brotto et al. (2010) found that the emphasis in these relationships was a shared assumption of a lack of sexual attraction and thus there would be a lack of sexual interaction within the intimate relationship.

In my research, however, I found that although there is an articulated pattern of described ease (no "messiness" as Brotto et al. phrased it [2010]), the shared

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<sup>109</sup> This may, however, relate to a lack of public awareness regarding the complexity of asexuals' intimate relationship practices. The majority of my participants were not in platonic intimate relationships and significantly preferred many romantic aspects.

understanding of what it means to experience a lack of sexual attraction did not necessarily equate to a lack of sexual interaction. Participation in these types of practices—and more physical behaviours generally—along with the significance given to these interactions in the intimate relationship is the reason I divided platonic intimate relationships from asexual-asexual intimate relationships. This categorisation was, however, problematized by the predominance of aromanticism among my participants in platonic intimate relationships. I considered grouping all “romantic” relationships together, but this did not give space for the complexity of sexual behaviours within mixed relationships. That is not to say that asexual-asexual relationships were always absent of sexual behaviours, but the difference in sexual orientation in a mixed relationship introduced stressors not often present in asexual-asexual relationships. The only issue with this division was that not all asexual-asexual non-romantic intimate relationships could be classified as platonic intimate relationships, but my sample was too small (n=2) to properly account for this population. Instead, I organised these individually based on their similarity to platonic patterns or asexual-asexual patterns. Although I expected asexual-asexual relationships to strongly represent a particular asexual identity, instead I noticed a distinct practice of co-opting aspects of heteronormativity where relevant and asexual identity when not. While not wholly subversive, the practices that I will detail later from asexual-asexual intimate relationships offer a perhaps more realistic shift in intimate relationships that straddles both heteronormative and transgressive practices.

The category of “polyamorous relationships” can and often does consist of relationships discussed in the previous sections. It is a unique classification in that these relationships often happen concurrently (though not always). For the purpose of grouping my participants, I classified any participant that was in multiple intimate relationships and/or searching/open to multiple intimate relationships as polyamorous. Initially, I expected to find polyamorous individuals among my participant pool, but I predicted this would be a result of mixed relationships and more reflective of the [often sexual] partner’s desires to seek outside partners rather than my participants’ desires. While this was the case in a couple of instances, it was not my primary finding.

“Polyamory” comes from the Greek word “poly” meaning many and the Latin word “amor” meaning love. In its contemporary applications, the word describes a practice or “form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously” (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 515). To clarify Haritaworn et al. (2006),

these relationships do not have to include sexual behaviours. Further, polyamory does not [always] equate to non-monogamy. Kleese (2006, p. 573) argues that “polyamory emphasizes love, whereas non-monogamy is based on a sex-oriented lifestyle or identity”. Anapol (2010, p. 4) similarly contends that “[s]omeone can be polyamorous even if the form of their relationship is monogamous”. For instance, Anapol (2010, p. 4) describes a couple who structured their relationship as open to polyamory and for a time were involved with another couple, but who then were not involved with any couple but still open to others coming in. The couple’s relationship was in a state of monogamy, but the couple was still polyamorous in practice. Anapol (2010, p. 6) also maintains how “[s]ome polyamorous relationships resemble traditional monogamous marriage in their emphasis on creating an impermeable boundary around the group, operating according to a well-defined set of rules (sometimes called a social contract), and expecting family members to replace individual desires with group agendas”. This is part of what Anapol (2010) calls the “old paradigm” of polyamory. I think the more important point here, however, is that many of these relationships are structured in a way that appear visibly monogamous to those outside the relationship. The new paradigm is slightly different in that its focus is to “further the psychological and spiritual development of the partners” (Anapol, 2010, p. 6) and includes “the presence of acceptance and unconditional love” which “take[s] precedence over everything else” (p. 68). These relationships can outwardly appear less stable as they are able to freely shift “from romance to friendship or from a closed marriage to an open marriage or marriage to divorce while maintaining a positive regard, caring and support for all those involved” (Anapol, 2010, p. 68).

Anapol (2010) outlines four types of polyamorous relationships: open marriages/relationships, intimate networks, group marriage and triads. An open marriage/relationship involves a “nonexclusive couple relationships [...]. In this scenario, the partners have agreed that each can have outside partners” (Anapol, 2010, p. 16). An intimate network is a “lovestyle in which several ongoing relationships coexist but usually people do not live together or they may share housing or land as roommates or community mates rather than as partners” (Anapol, 2010, p. 17). A group marriage “is a committed, long-term, primary relationship that includes three or more adults of any gender in a marriage-like relationship” (Anapol, 2010, p. 17). These arrangements can be open or closed, depending on the group’s preferences. A triad includes “three sexualoving partners who may be in any combination of primary, secondary, or non-hierarchical relationships” (Anapol, 2010, p. 18). My only

modification to these groups is the importance of de-emphasising the necessity of sexual interactions; a sexual relationship is not necessary for the relationship(s) to be classified as polyamorous. Anapol's (2010, p. 18) terms "primary", "secondary" and "non-hierarchical" refer to a categorisation that sometimes happens within polyamorous relationships in which individuals may value certain partnerships more than others. For instance, an "open marriage" would most likely entail a couple who view one another as their "primary" [partner/relationship] and any outside partners as "secondary". "Non-hierarchical" refers to view that no relationship is more [or less] important than another. The possible plurality of love and intimacy really posits a movement away from heteronormativity and toward subversive practices of intimate relationships. The full subversive potential of polyamorous relationships is explored toward the end of this chapter.

### *5.3 Heteronormative practices in asexual intimate relationships*

Of the 29 asexuals I interviewed, 18 had been or were in mixed relationships. This is significant because I found practices of seemingly heteronormative behaviour(s) among those in mixed relationships, suggesting that the HPS may have a pervasive effect on the types of intimate relationships asexuals enter and the related practices therein. There were three aspects of asexuals' mixed intimate relationships where a heteronormative framework was most evident: the dominance of physical intimacy [and its connection to the self/identity]; gender expectations; and agency in intimate practices.

In the introduction, I outlined four types of intimacy that were relevant to asexuals' intimate relationships: physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, intellectual intimacy and social intimacy. Physical intimacy is the most prized intimacy within the HPS. There is the "romantic kiss: the icon of intimacy" (Marar, 2002, p. 31). Sex is understood as a mandatory feature of an intimate relationship; Carrigan (2011, p. 474) even argues that it is viewed as "the perquisite for human flourishing". A frequent practice of physical intimacy, especially if it was sexual intimacy, was strongly correlated to mixed relationships and a heteronormative practice. Despite a lack of sexual attraction, many of my participants described partaking in sexual acts<sup>110</sup> for

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<sup>110</sup> When possible (i.e. when I am speaking only of individual acts) I use the term "sexual acts" rather than "practices" so as not to construe these acts to be experienced in a necessarily permanent and/or specifically sexual way. That is, a sexual act may be a physical practice and thus build physical intimacy, but it might not be understood or experienced as a sexual practice. For example, my participants often constructed masturbation as a physical experience, but not always as a sexual practice.

physically intimate purposes, including penetrative sex (n=5); mutual masturbation (n=4); oral sex, hand jobs and/or fingering (n=4); use of sex toys (n=3); BDSM acts (n=2); and phone sex, lying together naked, anal sex and massages were each mentioned once as forms of sexual acts used to stimulate intimacy.

Penetrative sex was almost always described as an act that was performed for one's partner. I understood many of these as performative heteronormativity given their complicity with the HPS given that participants assumed penetrative sex would be expected, wanted and enjoyed by their partners.<sup>111</sup> Sophia (cisgender, female, 26, British) was one participant who discussed a focus on her partner's needs during sexual interactions and, like other participants, she expressed a dislike of receiving sexual attention (e.g. she was against receiving oral sex). Similar to Sophia, when asked what motivated my participants to take part in these acts despite it being more for their partner, over half of my participants discussed largely pleasurable outcomes and how this was sometimes a motivating factor. Although Sophia struggled with sexual encounters with her partner, she explained:

[...] I know I usually will start to enjoy it in a physical/sexual way once we get into it. In certain positions it's very easy for me to reach orgasm, and although I don't crave them and could live without them, having an orgasm is something to look forward to I guess. It's not that I hate having sex or anything, it's just that it takes me ages to become aroused, and I only enjoy it for a limited amount of time before I get bored. But the bit in between becoming aroused and getting bored is pleasurable.

So although an act is not desired and/or is performed to appease another, experiences of pleasure can make it worthwhile.

I also found that penetrative and/or oral sex were often preferred when the sexual attention was shared or when one's partner was in the receiving role. Although giving and sharing did not always appear to create a sense of physical intimacy, being the focus of sexual interaction(s) was a frequent instance where physical intimacy was stifled. Some of the reasoning behind this relates back to asexuals participating in sexual interactions for their partner's intimate needs rather than their own, but it may be more

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<sup>111</sup> These practices were often associated with comments related to a sense of duty or obligation. In previous excerpts, participants discussed how x act occurred because it was what one was "supposed to do [as a partner]".

complex, especially as this aspect was noted among my sex-positive asexuals. In the asexual communities, particularly on Facebook, there is a common discussion around how sexual partners' reciprocation of giving sexual pleasure reflects one's partner's assumption of shared intimate needs. Not only are the intimate needs often not the same (though not always), the [sexual] assumption sometimes can make an asexual feel misunderstood and/or undermined and it, in turn, jeopardises the physical intimacy. While this was not widely discussed among my own participants, Heart (demi-female, 23, Canadian/English) described feeling "very skittish [...] when it comes to [enjoying] sensuality, because it can very easily be mistaken as sexual, and miscommunications around that are very stressful for me and unpleasant". In some ways, then, a lack of physical intimacy may be less about the acts and more about how others make sense of those interactions. There is a sort of identity preservation here where an asexual is more concerned about asserting who they are and what their practices mean than they are concerned and/or involved with the act in question. If this stressor is not present (e.g. if a partner does not appear to make assumptions regarding an asexual's experience), then there appears to be a more positive discussion of seemingly sexual acts.

These discussions also suggest that asexuals are making a choice to perform sexually and in very heteronormative ways. Despite being aware of the implications of their interactions and often not desiring them, they are still participating. There is a repeated denial of their preferences—as seen in the previous chapter, a compromise of the asexual identity—for interactions that are believed to be appreciated or preferred by the [hetero]sexual partner. Often if preferences are not discussed, an asexual will draw on the HPS and perform those practices. Heteronormativity in the mixed relationship, then, is an adoption or adaptation. It is often a deliberate re-enactment of (1) the public story and (2) a compromise of their asexual self.

Yet, some heteronormative practices seemed to operate in ways the participants were unaware. In an earlier chapter I discussed how I asked participants about the types of behaviours they participated in that they found intimate, romantic and/or sexual. I had to follow this question up with an emphasis on non-physical interactions because the majority of my participants detailed only physical acts/practices. I would argue that the fixation on the physical is their replication of the HPS: my participants equate intimacy with physicality despite the fact that when "pushed", they all detailed other types of interactions that generally were more significant to their own sense of intimacy in their intimate relationship. I also found that some of my participants attributed heteronormative understandings to their practices despite not associating or perceiving

the behaviour/practice in the same way. For example, Bryan discussed how his practices, including his linguistic practices, were influenced by the heteronormative understandings of his heterosexual partner:

Personally, I do feel a desire to ‘get off’ sometimes. I can do this by myself or with my wife. By myself is easier, but my wife prefers I do it with her, unless she’s not in the mood or is menstruating. For couple activity, I would often prefer mutual masturbation, which we have done a number of times. However, for her this isn’t ‘sex’. For her, ‘sex’ means my penis in her vagina. Therefore for us, ‘sex’ means my penis in her vagina. [...] Sex is an important part of marriage in all human cultures, so my wife regards it as a conjugal obligation. I sort of agree due to the sheer weight of precedent. I know that a lot of asexuals will have a serious problem with this view, and it’s not a view I express in public.

Despite preferring individual sexual practices, Bryan adopts his wife’s heteronormative view of sexual practices that is coupled and generally penetrative. The “sheer weight of precedent” is the sexual assumption central to the HPS. Here Bryan ignores his own views about “sex” and even his language shows how he is resigned to his partner’s preferred heteronormative performances. So not only did my participants produce a narrative consistent with the HPS, but the public story was so pervasive that it sometimes led to shifts in how asexuals perceived and engaged in their own physical and linguistic practices.

Bryan, like many other participants, also experienced heteronormative pressures along gendered lines. Bryan’s wife often pushed him to act in very traditionally masculine ways. Re-enactment of gender expectations was a common feature of the heteronormativity I found among my asexual participants’ intimate relationships. Gender expectations were noticeable in two ways: women doing the emotional work and men being expected to be sexually interested.

In work on emotional intimacy, researchers have often found that participants view women as the more emotional partner, who values emotional intimacy and is more likely to participate in those practices that could further emotional intimacy. For example, In Van Hooff’s (2013) analysis on modern coupledness and changes in heterosexual relationships, one participant, Alex (male), often “repeated cultural messages that women are more emotional than men: ‘She can’t accept that I don’t want



to cry every five minutes” (p. 119). Instead, Alex claimed he got his energy out via football. Van Hooff (2013) argued that this is proof that he’s no less emotional than his female partner as sport is an emotional release, but the emotional work is nonetheless constructed as the woman being the more emotional partner.

Van Hooff (2013, p. 129) further claims that “while women encourage their partners to talk about their feelings more, men may perform their own work by withholding their own emotions for fear of compromising their masculinity”. I thus expected that it was more often my female participants who discussed performing emotional intimacy, but instead found that it was widely desired, no matter one’s sex or gender. My findings could be because of my limited male sample. However, I did find some evidence that the cisgender men in my study experienced pressure from their spouse to behave in gender normative ways with emphasis on physical intimacy and a lack of attention on emotional intimacy. Earlier I discussed how Robin, though with a partner who often would initiate sex and who possessed a good deal of the sexual power, was pressured by his partner to initiate: to act like a man. Bryan (cisgender male, 30, American), in his relationship, often found himself forced into a more sexual role due to expectations to buy into gender performance(s):

In general, my wife has more traditional views of gender roles than I do, and earlier in our relationship it was very important to her that I be the one to initiate sexual activity. In practice, this often meant that I ‘initiated’ because she told me initiate. In this sort of situation it seemed rather questionable to say that I had initiated it, but for her it was important to maintain the belief that I initiated.

The illusion of initiation or initiation itself maintains a heteronormative narrative, despite his own preferences and even practices existing outside the HPS. His partner’s instruction is a verbal pressure, and Bryan’s lack of confrontation and emotional display ensures its continuity. [Western] Gender expectations pressure men to not disclose their emotional states, to not share difficulties, to not appear vulnerable.<sup>112</sup> This suggests that it may be more difficult for male asexuals to establish their intimate needs within a HPS narrative. Further, messages to silence one’s preferences may make it challenging for cisgender male asexuals to seek out [and perform] emotional intimacy in place of physical, sexual intimacy as many of their female counterparts have done.

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<sup>112</sup> Gender expectations are, however, generally shifting, but my participants referred to gender expectations as posited by the HPS and hegemonic masculinity.

Instead male asexuals were expected to perform sexually and behave in very heteronormative cisgender ways. In Chapter 3, I discussed how Shry was pressured by his colleagues to connect his masculinity to his sexual conquests. Earlier I discussed how Bryan's wife viewed sex as a "conjugal obligation". The heteronormative expectation of men performing sexually and often as the primary sexual agent was frequently expressed among my male participants, but the majority were found compliant with these messages. One instance of a minor transgression was when Cavi discussed how he cannot imagine himself getting married where his "physical duty as a husband would be in question". The transgression here is Cavi's avoidance of the social institution of marriage, but Cavi was still complicit in heteronormative understandings of maleness and its related physical [and sexual] expectations.

Some of my female participants held similar heteronormative expectations about potential male partners. In my discussion on gender/sex preferences, Katya explained that she had a preference for female partners over male partners, with the assumption that men would not give her the space to explore intimate behaviours in the way she desired. Kippa, in her discussion of her male heterosexual partner, emphasised body physique. She stated that she felt insecure and sad when her partner was too weak to pick her up. In conjunction with her previously described preferences for someone who was taller and larger than her, this could possibly be connected to a perception of the male body being well-built and the female body being small.<sup>113</sup> However, whereas the men seemed largely aware of the social pressures they were experiencing, the female participants who co-opted these heteronormative views did not interrogate their practices or note the problems of their position. Kippa did at one point acknowledge a preference for a heteronormative-like relationship,<sup>114</sup> which might be her recognising the ways in which she was a willing participant in and replicator of the public story. None of the others demonstrated any challenges.

The practice of willingness was a common theme when exploring heteronormativity among my participants. It was unclear how aware participants were of their participation in heteronormative interactions (despite being seemingly aware of heteronormativity as it related to their identification as described in chapter 3). There was prominent discussion around willingness and its relation to agency that suggested

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<sup>113</sup> Katya's preferences similarly suggest that women cannot be sexual predators and/or that women are not as sexually interested in men; a perception typical of the male orgasm-centred public story.

<sup>114</sup> Cited on pg. 118.

heteronormative influence, but it is unclear how much related to the HPS and how much was a reflection of an asexual identity.

Given the frequent participation in sexual acts that both did and did not create physical intimacy, I wanted to understand who initiated these sexual behaviours. When and under what circumstances were my participants the initiators, and were their practices reflective of heteronormative expectations? To clarify, I analysed both how and what participants said as well as their practices. Because the HPS is preserved through the maintenance of the narrative even if it contradicts one's practices, I was interested in looking at both aspects to best understand their involvement in the continuation of the HPS. For example, some of my participants discussed their partners being the primary initiators, but it was not truly reflective of their interactions. They initiated practices themselves, but they do not signal initiation always in non-sexual instances. Within those relationships where participants did not vocalise sexual acts as an intimate exchange,<sup>115</sup> they reported that it was always the partner who initiated:

He initiated behaviours almost every time. If I initiated, it would only be what I see as 'romantic behaviours'. I never felt comfortable with anything sexual.  
(Dora, demi-female, 20, Dutch)

I would say that the majority of the time we had intimate [sexual] contact it was the other partner that initiated it. They usually initiated petting or oral sex with a few occasions of penetrating sex. But after a few complaints that I should take the initiative every now and then, I did that. If I initiated it, it was petting and stimulation of sensitive areas. But to be honest, I don't think I ever became good at the whole things since you kinda [sic] need to be into it for the other partner to truly enjoy it. (Robin, male, 24, Scottish/Swedish)

It's usually always him, certainly for sexual behaviours. [...] I'd initiate out of a sense of obligation, and it tended to feel unnatural and awkward for both of us. Once I understood that I was asexual, I explained to him that it would benefit us if he always initiated. (Sophia, female, 26, British)

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<sup>115</sup> These relationships were predominantly mixed relationships.

Among this group, sometimes initiation was only discussed in relation to physical and/or sexual interactions. While some of this may relate to the way I asked my interview question(s), it is unclear as to why other forms of intimacy and intimate practices are not part of the relationship narrative. Initiation was used to signify key interactions between intimate partners, but despite other types of interactions being experienced as more significant to my participants, these often were not part of the intimate narrative, just as I noticed when I asked participants about what types of behaviours they participated in to create intimacy.

The sexual partner as the primary initiator also locates them as the active agent and most often in the role of the “male” within the public story. Because my participants were predominantly against receiving the majority of the sexual attention, it is easy to read this as sexual performance for one’s partner and just them being complicit in the sexual performances within an intimate relationship. However, I would argue that it is also possible to read this pattern of behaviour as a reflection of positing the sexual in the “male” role. That is, it is possible that asexuals are using the heteronormative framework to make sense of their physical participation in an intimate relationship.

If the sexual partner is the active sexual agent, it raises possible questions about asexuals’ agency in these sexual interactions and questions around “willingness”. Throughout my analysis I identified a persistent pattern of what I would call consentless intimacy. Sociological understandings of consent have been defined as verbal agreement for a particular act, but recently others have expanded it to include an aspect of enthusiasm (see Beres, 2014; Barker, 2013b).<sup>116</sup> In some instances, my participants were very clear about their practices of consent and what that looked like. ADP described his practice of consent:

Consent in our relationship is usually verbal for me and a mix of verbal and physical for her. We’re generally very clear about our feelings or ask each other for clarification if we’re not. I don’t feel that consent is an issue in our relationship. We communicate well and don’t pressure each other sexually.

Several of my participants discussed practices of safe, well-communicated boundaries, such as Dora who described herself as secure, but acknowledged that there

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<sup>116</sup> Beres (2014) offers a discussion on how willingness to have sex does not always translate into a wantingness for sex. She emphasises how there is a lack of clarity around whether individuals see consent as a state of wantingness.

were still times when she participated in something she did not want to. However, among my participants I found a consistent pattern of coercive sexual practices, repeated disinterest or dislike for sexual activity and, at times, experiences that would be questionable from a legal and/or criminal standpoint. Because of the sensitivity of the content and the likelihood that some of my participants may not have perceived their experiences as consentless (and possibly as instances of rape and/or sexual assault), I have chosen to paraphrase quotes and/or omit names where necessary. I will also rely on my own experiences to capture the complexity of the operation of consent.

Over the course of a nearly four year relationship, there were at least three instances of what I now recognise as rape. As an indifferent asexual, I normally had no issue with sex and often quite enjoyed it. My partner was the epitome of hegemonic masculinity and occasionally would suggest that “no” meant “try harder”,<sup>117</sup> but at that point I had never told him no. I had never told him yes, either.

The first time he raped me he had come back drunk, hours after he said he would be in. I refused him and was only half awake, but he proceeded anyways. I did not altogether mind, though. Sure, sleeping would have been preferred and my permission would have been nice, but rape? This did not even cross my mind. The experience was not traumatic. There were no bruises or marks, and in my naivety I associated rape as a traumatic experience. I thought if I ever were raped, I would call into question my body, my womanhood, my self—I would further my own victimisation as a contradiction of my feminist identity.

The second and third time I did say no. The second time, however, I was not against having sex, I just asked to go to the toilet first. The third time I distinctly said no multiple times and cried. He apologised immediately after and pampered me as if to make it up to me. He promised that next time we would have sex when I wanted to, which only really assured either of us that sex would happen again, that he could get away with his actions, that I would be happy with a sexual agreement/solution.

Consent is a very grey area, especially as it relates to asexuality. One of my female participants described her own experiences of voicing her refusal:

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<sup>117</sup> I have intentionally left this as I first wrote it, but it was interesting to re-read this and see that I included the word “suggest”. He made no “suggestion”, but instead firmly stood by that phrase. Even after accepting the incident as rape, I still find myself offering leniency to my ex and undermining my own experience.

I find I get more fulfilment when I don't feel pressured to do something that I don't really want to and unfortunately having sex is something my boyfriend likes to do. I'm working on being more ok telling him no, but it's hard to do, especially since we were having sex before I figured my ace-ness out.

Asexuals often describe a sense of feeling obliged or trapped into participating in sexual practices because of prior willingness. There is a strong sense of saying yes once means saying yes from then on. The notion of a continuous sexual life in an intimate relationship is a byproduct of the HPS. Despite many realising that in practice even heterosexual couples find that sex fades, the HPS as a narrative creates a pressure, especially in the wake of an intimate partner who desires sexual intimacy. Many discussed the importance of “compromise” as a means of negotiating this “shift”, which is very common among those who self-define as ambivalent or indifferent. Ea (female, nongender, 24, American), for example, detailed her participation in sexual practices in relation to her state of ambivalence:

I am also more ambivalent. In acknowledging my asexuality, I try to trick myself into enjoying sex, which might in turn extend the length of the physical moment or maybe improve the quality. I can't say for certain, because I don't enjoy it, either way. [...] Honesty in all forms is difficult if you are expected to have sex frequently but not lie – meaning, only do it when you enjoy it and mean it. Here, asexuality doesn't help.

Another participant discussed internal pressure. In her discussion on her rationale around consent, she called it “complicated”:

[...] consent is so complicated, I feel. I feel like there's coercion socially, like from media and family. Then there's personal coercion because it's like “I've done this before; we've had sex many times. My partner is in a moment of need”. I mean there are times in any sexual relationship where a partner does it for the other even when they might not be up to it and is that rape? I don't know. In my case, I definitely said no, but I realize I have also confused the situation because at times I have said no and truly meant yes and we proceeded.

Barker (2013a, p. 72) argues that “most people frequently make themselves have sex that they don’t really want, and try to force their own sexuality in the directions that they think it should go. Perhaps we should be just as condemning of that kind of coercion as violence against our selves”. Personal coercion generally stems from the sources Kippa pointed to (e.g. media), which is a reproduction of the HPS. This argument suggests that even in a sober frame of mind, social pressures may be so overpowering that an individual cannot truly consent. However, without this personal coercion properly recognised, many individuals find themselves participating in these unwanted sexual practices.

Prause and Graham (2007) and Brotto et al. (2010) found that asexuals in a relationship regularly consented to sexual activities for their partner(s) sake. I have previously established that this sexual performance is consistent with heteronormative expectations: the sexual imperative. However, calling it the sexual imperative or the “public story” fails to fully capture the complex way in which consent is operating in some of these intimate relationships. Some researchers might call this participation “consensual unwanted sex” (O’Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998). Consensual unwanted sex or sexual practices “refers to situations in which a person freely consents to sexual activity with a partner without experiencing a concomitant desire for the initiated sexual activity. In a sense, they feign sexual desire or interest. Participation by both partners in the sexual activity is consensual, but unwanted or undesired for at least one partner” (O’Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998, p. 234). Consent is sometimes given in these unwanted sexual practices because “to promote intimacy seems positive; doing so to avoid relationship tension is more negative” (Muehlenhad and Peterson, 2005, p. 18). Muehlenhad and Peterson (2005), however, fail to fully develop what negatively defined consent can really mean in an exchange: there is a suggestion of coerciveness or pressure that is left unexplored.

While I agree with O’Sullivan and Allgeier (1998, p. 234) who argue that “unwanted and undesired” are not synonymous with “non-consensual”, I would argue that a continual pattern of unwanted or undesired sexual interactions points to a need for a discussion around the factors which motivate the consent given in these situations. In fact, I would argue that it is the heteronormative framework which establishes a prescribed pattern of necessary sexual practices for an intimate relationship which my participants have found themselves complicit to—myself included. Above, Kippa pointed to media and familial pressures for why she chose to participate in sexual interactions. She replicated common messages of having participated in sex before to

justify further sexual interactions: a common tactic in sexual interactions designed to elicit coerced consent.

Asexuality adds a further layer of complexity onto consent by introducing a common state of indifference. Indifference means that many asexuals never find themselves in positions of “enthusiasm” or wantingness. If a person only ever experiences a state of indifference, it suggests they then only ever have consensual unwanted sexual interactions. Ea’s ambivalence was the site around which she showed openness to compromise, which for asexuals often meant that the socially expected sexual practices proceeded, but both parties had communicated their boundaries. That is, because the sexual partner had a definitive preference, that preference became the practice that was then modified by the asexual’s boundaries. Or, there was an established exchange (e.g. I received hair brushing). In these latter instances, consent in unwanted sexual practices was deemed acceptable because there was a balanced exchanged.

I am highlighting this complexity because it raises particular questions around how we understand our participation in sexual practices and the role of consent. Many asexuals are saying “no, but go ahead”, which changes both the way we talk about consent and how it is or is not practised. States of indifference cloud our understandings of the experiences of sexual assault and rape. I do not mean to impose these labels on some of my participants’ experiences, but as an asexual who simply did not care about giving consent, I can at least speak from the position necessitating a wider view of what rape can comprise of or what it maybe does not. That is, I was raped by all terms and definitions, but in the first two instances, I reject this term as an actual reflection of my involvement [or lack thereof] in the sexual act(s). What does that mean for our understandings of sexual practices and their related consent? I certainly would never suggest the dismissal of need for consent, but I would encourage a deeper analysis of consent and its relation to unwanted sexual interactions.

Although this is a particularly asexual-specific practice and could be included in my analysis of asexuality’s location between both a heteronormative practice and transgressive one, I chose to discuss it under heteronormative frameworks because of the way “consent” is discussed in relation to sexual practices and the heteronormativity behind my participants’ performances. Further, while [lack of] consent by some of my participants points to a need for a deeper understanding, my participants were not challenging the heteronormative frameworks. They were not questioning their



participation; they were choosing to find ways of taking part despite not wanting nor desiring the interactions. There was nothing particularly transgressive in their practices.

Initially I posed the question as to whether my participants' relationships were as seemingly heterosexual as my own had been. After analysing my participants' transition from a sense of brokenness to a social asexual identity, I expected a particular resistance to heteronormative expectations. After all, it was many of these practices which my participants found most damaging to their senses of selves. Nonetheless, I noticed the public story was so pervasive that despite acknowledging one's relationship to heteronormativity, many continued to be complicit in the practices. This was most noticeable in the pervasiveness of physical and especially sexual [intimate?] practices. These practices were often framed as the sexual being the active agent unless an asexual was male. Social expectations and personal coercion often led to a grey area around how [un]willing individuals were in their sexual interactions. While most of these practices stifle the opportunity for challenging the public story, asexuals' experience of consent raises questions around how individuals consent, what qualifies as consent and when/where does consenting to unwanted behaviours become excessive (if a valid thing at all).

#### *5.4 Subversions and transgressions: Passing or revolutionising?*

I do get very prickly when people suggest or tell me outright that a relationship without sex is not "real" or is "just a friendship". I'm a highly romantic person, I love deeply, and it is very hurtful when other people make judgments and tell me that the love I feel for my boyfriend is not as real, true, or meaningful as the love sexual people feel. I believe both sexual relationships and asexual relationships are equally devoted and loving and romantic and real" (Caf, female, 21, American)

Intimate relationships are much more complex than the HPS might suggest. In particular, an asexual relationship may challenge—or transgress—practices of heteronormativity through the rejection of [penetrative] sex.<sup>118</sup> Caf's frustration around what can and cannot constitute a "real" relationship is a direct challenge to the essence

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<sup>118</sup> Arguably, any form of sex can be seen/framed as transgressive, but penetrative is often what my participants mean when they talk about "sex", and it was most central to and thus most transgressive in regards to the heteronormative public story.

of what makes a relationship. One of the rules<sup>119</sup> of sex as outlined in Meg Barker's *Rewriting the Rules* (2013a, p. 59) is that sex "is very important, and a defining feature of our relationships and identities". Caf suggests that her "asexual" relationships are equally "real" in that they are meaningful, full of devotion and love. These relationships are equal.

There are a few issues with Caf's claim(s), but the meaning is significant. Caf's position is still entangled with a perception of relationships as located within messages of love and devotion which demonstrates how although these relationships can be subversive, they can also be heteronormative. It is also problematic that she divides sexual and asexual relationships. The only difference between a sexual and an asexual relationship appears to be the presence/absence of sexual attraction by one or both parties. In a transgressive and/or subversive model of sexuality with attention on pleasure rather than desire, however, this divisive point is irrelevant. When comparing relationship practices, there is actually much overlap; Caf even participated selectively in sexual behaviours, which demonstrates the lack of clarity between these supposed two types of relationships.

This lack of a division is important to recognise because there is a distinct practice of othering non-normative (a)sexual relationships. There is another rule about relationships that claims that "there is one 'right' or 'best' way of doing things" which suggests that "any other ways of doing things is somehow wrong, inferior, or deviant" (Barker, 2013, p. 6). So to argue that these types of relationships are "equal" is to be complicit with the very rules one is attempting to subvert.

Nonetheless, Caf's intimate relationship practices did subvert the heteronormative story as did many other participants' stories. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 5) defined subversion as "a reflexive undermining of heteronormativity that can produce challenges to or shifts in the norm, even if these do not appeal to be radical". They argue that there "is a certain deliberate element to subversion; or, at least, subversion involves some deliberation. However, the goal may be simply a desire to do things a little differently, not wider revolution" (p. 5). This is a useful framework for looking at asexuals' transgressive and subversive practices in the application of transgressive/subversive findings because although some participants like Caf openly critiqued normative assumptions, other participants voiced concern about how their

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<sup>119</sup> Barker (2013, p. 5) intentionally chooses to title normative expectations as rules because although there are not established, set rules, "it can often *feel* like there is a set of unwritten rules which everyone is trying to follow and which are unquestioned and taken for granted. They are just what everyone does".

views and practices have been misused by researchers to suggest wider revolutionary practices. Similarly, Dawson et al. (2016, p. 1) argue how “rather than seeking to transform the nature of intimate relationships, asexual people make pragmatic adjustments and engage in negotiations to achieve the forms of physical and emotional intimacy they seek”.

Counter to the claim made by Dawson et al. (2016), I found some practices that were transgressive and/or subversive. These practices led to wider understandings of intimate relationships for my participants and offer opportunities to change the public story. I am however cautious that not all of my participants saw their practices as transformative, some did not seek to articulate or refused the possibility of a transformation, and the practices I refer to do not always operate subversively or transgressively (e.g. mutual masturbation can be performed for heteronormative reasons or as a selected alternative to heteronormative practices, chosen for their pleasurable benefits). There were three main areas where I noted transgressive and/or subversive potential: (1) the formation of non-normative relationships, (2) practices of reframing the heteronormative story, and (3) perceptions and practices that challenged or questioned what is sexual.

By “non-normative” relationships, I am referring to types of relationships that challenge the traditional partnering structure (e.g. polyamory) as well as particular practices that reimagine heteronormative coupledness (e.g. partners who live apart). Cynthia (female, nongender, 30, Chinese) was one participant who presented her relationships in a way that was subversive. Her relationship style/model offered a way for both rethinking monogamy and challenging heteronormative coupledness practices. Ze identified as a relationship anarchist (RA), which falls under non-hierarchical polyamory. Ze referred to herself as polyamorous not long after identifying as asexual. Prior to this, ze was with a heterosexual man. They went on to get married, but it was within this relationship that ze came to identify as asexual and then ze and her partner, G, chose to introduce polyamory into their relationship. Together, they moved their relationship from a practice of singular heteronormativity to an emphasis of plurality. At the time of her interview, Cynthia was in a long-distance triad with A (demisexual male) and L (asexual female). When describing her multiple relationships and relationship anarchy ze stated:

Personally I think the most important characteristic of RA is building every relationship from scratch and doing whatever feels right for everyone involved,

regardless of the pre-set relationship categories and rules defined by the society [...] RA's usually don't care much about relationship labels or status; what they care about is the substance of a relationship. For example, my relationships with A and L fall in the grey area: We're more intimate than "friends" in its usual sense, but we're not typical "(romantic) partners" either. [...] we don't care, as long as we're happy with what we have.

Barker (2013a) argues how plurality is one way in which the rules of relationships—or the HPS as I am referring to its normative structure—can be re-written. Barker (2013a) is referring to a plurality of the self when ze mentions it, but I am extending it to reflect the intimate practice of our plural selves through the adoption of multiple intimate relationships. Cynthia's adoption of multiple relationships allows hir to find fulfilment and happiness in multiple spaces. Ze's able to meet varying needs from different partners/relationship arrangements, while seeing all these relationships as no more or less important than the other; they are all equally significant.

The non-monogamous nature of Cynthia's intimate relationships is a direct challenge to heteronormative expectations. Although hir relationship with hir male partner still may look heteronormative, ze has shifted the meaning of their intimate relationship to one of plurality. Cynthia openly rejects the "pre-set relationship categories and rules defined by society" making hir views of intimate relationships subversive. The views of my participants did not always align with the practices, but in Cynthia's case, both were subversive. It was clear that ze had interrogated the frameworks facing hir [initial] partner and ze and found a way of doing intimacy and relationships that was fulfilling and with multiple partners: "we don't care, as long as we're happy with what we have".

Cynthia's partner selection practices introduced plurality as well as reimagined the intimate partner. Like Cynthia, one of Kleese's (2006, pp. 569) participants, Cath, explored the topic of "lines" between friendships/relationships. Cath calls her intimate relationships "polyamorous friendships", which Kleese (2006) argues blurs "the line between friendship and relationship [...], if it is necessary at all". Cynthia defined hir relation to A and L as teetering somewhere between "friends" and "romantic partners", but as Kleese (2006) argued, this distinction is largely irrelevant within the functioning of non-hierarchical polyamorous relationship(s), and I agree. Cynthia, for instance, reported that ze did not have romantic feelings for L, but that she was "as important" as G and A "because [their] intellectual and emotional connection is just as strong". This

experience was what solidified Cynthia's view that one did not need to feel romantically toward someone for them to be a significant intimate partner. The practices of polyamory and of intimacy built around romantic attraction or platonic intimacy force a new understanding of what defines an intimate partner(s). Cynthia refuses heteronormative understandings in preference for whatever it is that makes hir happy, which is demonstrative of a pleasure-framework. These relationships then call for an increased understanding of how the intimate partner(s) is identified and recognised. These practices suggest a view of an intimate partner as someone with whom there is an exchange of meaningful intimacy that is openly defined by the pleasure<sup>120</sup> sought and/or experienced from the partnering.

Polyamorous relationships can, of course, take many forms. Cynthia's relationships included an open relationship with G and a long-distance triad with A and L. The relationships function differently because of proximity: at the time of the interview, Cynthia lived with and was married to G whereas hir relationship with A and L was entirely virtual (but with the hope that it would not remain so). Further, hir relationship with G was "the only socially visible one", which restricted hir social performance as a polyamorist. Because G was a heterosexual man, their relationship functioned much like a mixed relationship. Cynthia believed that hir asexuality limited hir ability to meet G's intimate needs: "His ideal sexual interactions should involve mutual passion and desire, which I can't provide, even though I can enjoy sex". Cynthia and G maintained open communication, discussing what each did/did not like and reflecting that in their selection of intimate behaviours in order to maintain a balance in the relationships and ensure that the interactions (or lack thereof) were not costing one partner more than the other. Alongside that was their agreement that each was allowed to have additional relationships to receive the benefits they felt they might be missing in their relationship.

Cynthia's triad with A and L functioned slightly differently given that it operated entirely online and also because A and L were both on the asexual spectrum. Within the triad, all members were jointly in an intimate relationship. Their relationship was built around intimacy stimulated via conversation, which can be expected in a virtual relationship given its physical limitations. Although they participated in a limited number of virtual behaviours, the majority of their emotional intimacy came from maintenance behaviours and discussing their relationship potential (meeting):

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<sup>120</sup> I use pleasure to refer to happiness here as well as intimate or sensational pleasure as some might tend to view it.

A, L, and I do express our emotional intimacy in our emails, such as saying how happy we are in this relationship, how we hope to meet up and have "cuddle threesomes", etc. The expression of compersion also feels very intimate to me. For example, I'm probably going to meet A and L separately this summer. Although the two of them can't meet, A is happy that L and I are going to meet, and vice versa for L.

These types of relationships offer another form of transgressing or subverting the HPS.<sup>121</sup> While this intimate relationship is already transgressive given its polyamorous state, it is further transgressive in that it exists entirely online and thus removes physical intimacy and the [physical] body from the intimate practices. Many of the practices exhibited within the relationship were the same as those that one might see in a non-virtual relationship. For example, Messman et al. (2000, p. 76) argue the importance of partners communicating their feelings about a relationship. This was exactly what Cynthia reported that A, L and hir did. Further, Cynthia often referred to behaviours that reinforced positivity within the relationship which Messman et al. (2000, p. 88) claim as essential to maintaining a cheerful intimate relationship and enjoyable interactions, which yielded high benefits within the relationships. Further, Cynthia, A and L participated in fantasy behaviour (planning to visit, discussing future events) that provided reassurance to each partner of the stability of their intimate relationship. Cynthia also mentioned that ze "can relate to A and L better on certain things (e.g. we have shared 'ace moments' sometimes) because we're all on the asexual spectrum", suggesting a connection around a shared identity. Cynthia reported multiple types of relationship maintenance behaviour which further developed the intimacy within hir triad relationship.

Like virtual relationships, long distance relationships or living together apart<sup>122</sup> relationships demonstrate subversive and/or transgressive potential. For example, Alex explained:

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<sup>121</sup> It is worth highlighting, however, that sometimes these practices may still be very heteronormative, but located in a virtual space. For example, Platypus discussed meeting his partner online and participating in phone sex. There was still a possibly imposed sexual heteronormative practice. Nonetheless, the emphasis on communication and emotional intimacy creates an opportunity to at least be transgressive and to consider intimate relationships from a position away from the body and our desires to perfect the body or act with the body (i.e. have sex) as is suggested by the public story.

<sup>122</sup> These are relationships where partners deliberately choose or are forced to not to live together.

I'm good for the semi-daily blow job, but if we had a close up rather than a long distance relationship, I think it would be restrictive enough for me that I would have ended it, because he wouldn't be able to bring me pleasure the way I liked and I would be reluctant to bring him pleasure the way he'd like. Or restrictive enough for him that he'd have ended it because he wouldn't be getting what he wants out of an intimate relationship.

The distance, then, allowed Alex to limit the sexual expectations of her relationships so that she could have a more satisfying relationship. Although her practices highlight some of the issues around consent that I discussed in the previous section, it is her practice of a long distance relationship that is significant here. Like a virtual relationship, there is a de-emphasis on sexual interactions and an emphasis on personal exchange, which places emotional intimacy more at the core of the intimate relationship rather than physical intimacy. This is particularly transgressive because it leads to an emphasis on the emotional aspects; it is subversive in that it suggests proximity to the body is not necessary for a successful intimate relationship.

Living apart together intimate relationships operate somewhat similarly, but they are more subversive in that there can be a greater deliberate choice to challenge traditional models for doing intimate relationships. Often times, couples will live in the same town, but choose to have their own space. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 81) argues:

The subversiveness of distance relations may be rather quiet, but it is not boring. It challenges usual norms about heterosexual coupledom as requiring cohabitation. Being apart can help partners avoid boredom and allow for new forms of playfulness, which may challenge what counts as sexual.

Living apart together was not that common among my participants, but I did have one, Xaida (female, 37, German), who lived with her female partner and the children they raised together, while her male partner lived across the street. In regards to her male partner, Xaida did not entirely turn down the possibility of him living with them in the future (as her female partner's boyfriend also resided with them), but she did discuss how her arrangement was very fulfilling: the things she wanted most were at her access, while still permitting her to have as much or as little space as she desired.

Alternative relationship models and practices then are helpful for rearranging the literal boundaries of a relationship by either expanding the plurality or by dictating the

distance between. These relationships offer a subversive potential for the way they decentre the importance of the body<sup>123</sup> and its related physicality from the core of the intimate relationships and emphasise the different aspects of the self. Polyamorous relationships go further by introducing greater plurality in a largely monogamous public story. While not only challenging the static nature of the intimate relationship and self, the plurality of a polyamorous relationship forces us to recognise the different types of relationships and intimate partners in our lives every day and the ways we can achieve fulfilment from each of these.

Along with non-normative relationship structures, I noticed patterns of every day intimate practices that reframed heteronormativity. Beasley et al. (2012) argue that a “quiet” way of challenging heteronormativity and thus the public story is through practices that can subtly undermine it. The practices need not be revolutionary. These subtle underminings were most noticeable among those in mixed relationships where they constantly faced expectations of heteronormative practices, especially performing penetrative sex. Rather than refusing to participate in these interactions, some of my participants chose to instead reframe the meaning behind these engagements, discussed with their partner ways of making it more meaningful, and/or selected practices that circumvented the expected male orgasm for more pleasurable or preferred practices.

ADP (female, agender, 28, American) talked about hir intimate relationship and the ways ze negotiated social expectations. Ze stated:

[Her partner’s] main pleasure in our cuddling and lovemaking comes from my pleasure, so she needs me to find it enjoyable, which I generally do. I think she also wishes that I found it ‘hot’, especially when I’m pleasuring her, which is not really possible for me as an asexual. I think that my asexuality allows me to focus on connecting with and pleasuring her, which enhances my ability to read her responses and be a better lover in terms of skill but it will sometimes bother her that I’m not excited by it myself, which will dampen her pleasure. [...] I’m fairly limited in terms of the sexual acts that I sometimes enjoy receiving and don’t have any desire to expand those, but I would like to expand on sex acts that she has mentioned she would enjoy receiving—strap-on penetration and DS

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<sup>123</sup> However, it is again worth noting that the virtual relationship can be more complicated and less subversive. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 49) argue that although the online space can be freeing from gender and adds/shifts sexual practices, “these reimaginings may be limited because online presence usually connects to corporeal presence, so that most online relationships become or are already face-to-face relationships—especially with the emergence of social network sites like Facebook”.



play with me as the dominant partner. There's probably more, but she's very hesitant to open about it to me because she knows that I probably wouldn't take direct pleasure in it, though I would enjoy her pleasure.

Rather than hir intimate practices being about expected sexual performance, ADP framed hir interactions through a pleasure framework, dictating the practices ze would like to partake in and acknowledging how they related to hir pleasure and hir partner's pleasure. It would be easy to read this as ADP being complicit with social expectations within an intimate relationship, but this would ignore ADP's agency as expressed in the way in which ze seeks pleasure from hir partner's enjoyment. Despite not finding the behaviours themselves pleasurable, ADP located meaning elsewhere in the interactions by finding ways to give and meet the needs of hir partner. It is not hir partner who pressures hir to be more sexually active and experimental, but hir own desire to try different sexual practices. Further, ze believed it was hir asexuality which allowed hir to elicit the meaning that ze does find. Ze's experience of asexuality was then a means through which ze could undermine the public story.

ADP discussed pleasure more generally, but other participants found different ways to transgress or subvert the public story. For participants like Katya, challenging heteronormative practices involved rejecting mostly penetrative behaviours in favour of sexual interactions that ze found comfortable. When discussing why ze participated in sexual behaviours, Katya explained:

Well, my first reason for participating in a sexual behavior, like using vibrators, was that it was an action that I would still be mentally and physically comfortable with while also keeping my partner happy. It was also an action that my partners could see as sexual and find satisfaction in, and it would provide physical stimulation which I might find pleasurable without skin on skin sexual contact (which I am extremely uncomfortable with).

In hir analysis of intimate relationship rules, Barker (2013a, pp. 59-60) discusses how one of the rules regarding sexual interactions is that not only must sex be a "defining feature", but it must be "great sex". Katya (female, agender 20, American), however, did not want to participate in skin-on-skin sexual contact. Ze directly refused these rules, but rather than abandoning physical intimacy, ze identified interactions that would be pleasurable to hir partner and potentially hirself. Like Katya, many of my

participants found specific practices that they would participate in or that were pleasurable and emphasised those practices in their intimate relationships. Notions of “great sex” then were replaced with a wider variety of accepted physical (and at times non-physical) intimate practices and notions of “greatness” were replaced with “pleasurable”, keeping in mind that “pleasure” can be experienced in many different ways for the same person. One could have terrible sex as imagined by the HPS, but find it extremely pleasurable because there were other types of established intimacy.

For those who did not necessarily challenge the “coital imperative” and did participate in penetrative sex, there was still a practice of transgression through a displacement of the “male orgasm as the goal” as discussed in Jackson and Scott (2010) to an emphasis on the female body and/or the practice of having sex but not focusing on having an orgasm. Kippa, for example, focused on increasing communication around what she enjoys about her body to change her partner’s focus on his own orgasm:

The difference [between her partner and her’s sexualities] comes in the way we experience and talk about sexual behaviours. For him, prior to dating me, so much was about the orgasm and penetrative sex. He understood very little about the female body and how bodies can be different despite having had sex with seven women for some time prior to me. We talked a lot about my body and how I please myself. He got me a vibrator and was attentive to the fact that sex could and would likely bore me.

Kippa (female, 25, American) was one participant who described finding penetrative sex very pleasurable, but by emphasising her own body she encouraged a non-normative approach to penetrative sex. Kippa’s approach may have led to her finding penetrative sex even more pleasurable. Barker (2013a, p. 61) argues that “the assumptions many people have about what normal sex involves” are “some ‘foreplay’, followed by a penis penetrating a vagina, both parties becoming more and more excited and then having orgasms”. However, when these assumptions are challenged, individuals can then instead focus on their own pleasure. Kippa utilised her practice of masturbation to inform her penetrative sexual practices and transgress this traditional view of “normal sex”. Her comments about her partner having been with seven women and not knowing much about the female body also implies a need to hold people accountable for engaging in these misleading practices.

My participants' attempts to transgress and/or subvert heteronormativity through displacing normative practices of sexual intimacy raised a third area of possible transgression/subversion: challenging what is/is not [always] sexual. In the previous section, I quoted my participant Katya's sexual behaviours, but what was interesting about her comments was that in her discussion on using things like vibrators, she cited this type of behaviour as "an action [her] partners could see as sexual". Is sex always sexual? Prior to this research I would have said that of course it is, but according to my participants, it does not have to be. Katya's comments suggest that she did not see her [inter]actions as sexual. Further, when my participants discussed their [frequent] acts of masturbation, they equated masturbation to "cleaning out the pipes" and other similar expressions that suggest a duty to masturbate rather than a sexual inclination. In the online communities such as AVEN and asexual Facebook groups, people often discuss masturbating without any form of aids or fantasy element. The act of masturbation is framed very non-sexually despite being more widely perceived as a sexual practice.

But how is sex not always sexual? In a discussion of what she found intimate, Caf outlined her view on what constitutes sexual activity:

For me personally, "sexual activity" must involve other people. I would never think of things in a sexual way if it was just up to me, so masturbating isn't sexual because it only involves me, myself, and I. But once there's another person involved, I'm reminded that "this is sexual" because I know the other person is perceiving it in that way. So yes, anything I do with my boyfriend that involves either of our genitals is sexual because that interaction has a VERY different dynamic and implications than what I may or may not do with my own genitals in privacy.

Caf referring to her activities with a partner as sexual is her participating in the heteronormative expectations of sex—and similar practices—as sexual activity. She, like Katya, discussed a perception of sex as sexual because of the way her partner would perceive it. This implies that there is a distinction between social perception and individual experience. Sex is socially perceived as sexual, but is experienced non-sexually. Variability in perception of the sexual is not overtly transgressive; it commonly occurs at any given time. For instance, there are different beauty practices or parts of the body that are seen as sexual across cultures. Historically, the acceptance of some physical practices has gone from being deemed a "sin" to accepted sexual

practices. Variability in sexual perception is not new, but in his acknowledgement of varying perceptions, Caf both participates and does not participate in the public story. She transgresses it, but does not fully subvert it.

It was theorised that asexual intimate relationships have transgressive potential because of their position as non-normative relationships. Although I still resist calling them wholly transgressive and do not feel that such a singular image reflects what is really happening within these intimate relationships, there were meaningful findings that could offer transgressive and/or subversive possibilities for the HPS. I found that an emphasis on plural selves as suggested by Barker (2013a) meant that it was possible to shift what can be expected from an intimate partner and change the range of what constitutes an intimate relationship. The notion of plural selves de-stabilises ideals of the monogamous soulmate, re-imagines what makes an intimate partner and challenges the spaces in which intimate relationships can take place. Much of this is already suggested in an analysis of polyamorous and virtual relationships, but asexuality adds an emphasis on alternative physical practices. Physical intimacy as seen in a heteronormative framework was transgressed through the displacement of the male orgasm and toward a focus of a pleasure framework.

### *5.5 Reconstructing the intimate narrative: Stimulating a pleasure framework*

So far I have established the instances where asexuals are complicit with the heteronormative public story as well as practices of transgression and/or subversion. What is lost in my analysis is how despite finding these patterns that are largely heteronormative and/or largely transgressive/subversive, I have ignored the overlap that often occurs. It is this overlap which is critical to displacing desire at the heart of the public story and introducing a pleasure framework. When discussing a pleasure framework, I am not positing a return to the sex wars which pitted “sex as danger” against “sex as pleasure” (Beasley et al., 2012, pp. 18-19). A pleasure framework does not necessitate a pro-sex view as I seek to define and understand it. I am suggesting a movement away from pleasure as [only] synonymous with sex or even something sexual. Beasley et al. (2012, p. 57) argue that we need to understand “why and how pleasure, rather than, say desire, might be a crucial site for rethinking heterosexuality”. I similarly seek to apply it to asexuality because, as Beasley et al. (2012) claim, desire “may be understood as tied to modes of ‘being’, modes of identity, as a form of ‘orientation’ disclosing the truth of the self in terms of desire for particular others and acts, and hence remains linked to regulatory regimes of sexuality”. A heterosexual is

always understood as a person who desires sex with a person of the opposite sex, but within a pleasure framework, one's orientation does not dictate the types of sexual interactions or even the presence of sexual practices. Although this risks the social identity of asexuals,<sup>124</sup> such a framework would enable the dismantling of the public story, would displace a need to define asexuality through sexual behaviours and would allow for greater variety of intimate relationships between asexuals and non-asexuals alike.

However, such a pleasure framework could start from the public story. Through my analysis, I identified practices where asexuals were adopting particular heteronormative practices, but transgressing them in minute ways; the public story was the bones and the transgression was the new "meat". Or, as I mentioned at the beginning, my relationship—or any relationship—may look heteronormative, but the experience of it can be something else entirely. There were three patterns among my participants that demonstrated how one might move to a pleasure framework and how heteronormative and transgressive practices may complement one another to form this new structure: shifts in relationship patterns/types, communication of pleasure and non-sexual pleasure, and the displacement of physical intimacy.

In my discussion on transgressive and subversive practices I discussed how some of my participants were forming a variety of intimate relationships for different purposes that allowed for fulfilment of our multiple selves. Some of these relationships either happened in a dual situation where a [monogamous,] heteronormative relationship was ongoing and/or others used this new space to challenge the pattern of the traditional intimate relationship. In the first instance, a person may have a "primary" intimate relationship, which follows the traditional social expectations, but they reject notions of a single person who can make their life fulfilling. Participants differed on what additional relationships looked like, however. For those who were non-monogamous, it was likely that a person would form additional intimate relationships, both physical and platonic. There were others who used "deep friendships". The expansion of the intimate relationship has the potential to lead to fulfilment of more aspects of our selves, but it also challenges the types of intimacies we exchange with our friends and partners. There is an opportunity for making the multiplicity of intimate relationships a more widely accepted occurrence which could strengthen all types of

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<sup>124</sup> I would argue that this social identity is still relevant and a pleasure framework does not necessarily equate to the erasure of this identity.

relationships; the boundaries of “staying friends” can become less relevant if a person wants it to.

Other participants followed similar heteronormative frameworks, but shifted the purpose of the intimate relationship. For example, platonic intimate relationships offered an opportunity to restructure the HPS. These relationships among my participants were almost always of a monogamous structure, but rather than complying with prescribed practices of physical intimacy, proximity and an emphasis on the body, platonic intimate relationships encouraged a model of thinking about intimate partnering that focused around companionship. These participants were generally either self-identified aromantic asexuals or asexuals who expressed some repulsion toward sexual behaviours. This meant that the relationships were marked by the establishment of [often detailed] physical boundaries. The relationships were formed to satisfy goals predominantly for companionship. Kay (female, 24, American), for instance, stated:

I like companionship in the sense of being around someone, but not necessarily physically touching all the time. In the same room, both of us doing our own thing, but occasionally chatting, watching something together, playing games, and so on.

Platonic intimate relationships are a new way of thinking about how distance can create meaning in a relationship. I defined living apart together couples as transgressive in the way they claim independence, but there is still an element of heteronormativity to their relationship(s). There was Kay who suggested a living together apart model, which similarly suggested a heteronormative framework, but with different goals. The rejection of goals around sex—or physical intimacy more largely—, of being constantly engaged with one’s partner, of the body as a critical site for an intimate relationship allowed Kay to create a relationship model that met her pleasurable interests (e.g. playing games, watching something). To get a more complete sense of these relationships, I detail one of my participants’, Aeron’s (female, non-binary, 29, Canadian), [queer]platonic intimate relationship(s).

I (as most people) want to have people in my life. While I spend most of my time alone, I don't want to be alone all the time. [...] Also, things like emotional support and solidarity are important and somewhat difficult to do and have alone. [...] Since those connections for me are typically \*not\* of a romantic

nature, they're de facto of some non-normative relationship category (that we use the umbrella term of "queerplatonic" to designate).

Aeron identified as “very close to aromantic”. Aeron struggled to build trust with individuals and to deal with that, ze tended to interact with individuals who shared similar political views or were emotionally accessible to hir through shared identities (e.g., genderqueer). Likewise, Aeron struggled in group interactions, which meant one-on-one interactions were the only avenues for finding a partner. Aeron argued that logistically, this was the reason ze tended to be in platonic intimate relationships—nothing else could follow. Aeron, thus, wanted an intimate relationship, but had to find a type of relationship that suited hir unique needs. Ze discussed three platonic intimate relationships in hir life. The first relationship ze found intellectually stimulating and open. Ze was taken with the fact that the person was interested in hir:

I had a couple friends at that point in my life, but nobody I was really close to and certainly nobody I could talk to about stuff like multiple universes or the monstrosity of [local political figure]. [...] after years of being a freak, here was another freak [...] And this was someone who gave me the energy to do and be the dorky/freaky things I wanted to do (like participate in a fictional star ship crew) or make fractal baked goods. [...] When we started out, we were good for each other. And it was a lot of fun.

This relationship developed largely from intellectual intimacy and shared interests, a common feature of asexual partner characteristic preferences, but also this type of social exchange met hir overall goal of companionship. Physical interactions were limited as I expected to find in a platonic intimate relationship, however, Aeron phrases it to suggest that hir physical boundaries would be more flexible if the person’s perceptions were less sexual: “[...] hugging and especially cuddling often was not something I was comfortable with [the person] because it felt sexual because for [hir] most things are”. Aeron discussed hir ability to have the “energy to do and be the dorky/freaky things” ze wanted to do. This goes back to the idea of creating intimate relationships that allow us to explore our multiple selves. The relationship terminated over time as the two matured into different individuals and the relationship could no longer provide the type of companionship Aeron needed.

Aeron's second platonic relationship was with another asexual who ze met on AVEN. The two "talked online for a few months and then met in person": a comfortable form of one-to-one interaction that suited Aeron's relationship formation pattern. Much as in the first relationship, conversation was the driving point for Aeron. The person was located close to Aeron for a time and the two were able to spend a lot of time together. This enabled the formation of a platonic intimate relationship until Aeron had to relocate. With the increased distances and the shifting forms of interactions, the costs of the interactions were such that the relationship was not able to continue.

The third relationship Aeron sought out as "the person" was a prior acquaintance:

I wrote hir a letter that had a big impact on hir, and after that we started talking on the phone somewhat regularly and then later, regularly. Ze is very emotionally open, and is an artist in ways I'm not. [...] After about a year [...] ze and I started getting \*really\* close.

Aeron initially perceived the person to be in a difficult situation and oblivious to what was happening to hirself. Early on in their relationship, Aeron provided a lot of support for this person which allowed for the development of intimacy, and over time, the person helped Aeron rediscover certain aspects of hirself. They negotiated spending time with Aeron's family which met Aeron's emotional needs, supporting the person's medical needs/assistance and balancing consent amidst that person's history of abuse. Aeron introduced more physical behaviours into this relationship to generate a greater variety of intimacy, but these behaviours fluctuated in response to the person's needs:

We used to have a very physical relationship (lots of hugging and cuddling), mutually initiated, although ze initiates hugs much more often. It's not that I don't like hugs, but it's more that physical contact can be really triggering for hir so I mostly let hir set the boundaries with things like that. [...] More recently, any kind of physical contact (even bumping into someone in a hallway) has been really triggering so we don't hug very much anymore-- there's a lot more air-hugging and reaching for hands across distance without actually touching. [...] I also used to kiss hir forehead, usually in a goodbye context and ze would often kiss my cheek, but again these are things that we don't do anymore because hir boundaries have changed around touch.



Although Aeron expressed a slightly more significant transition in their relationship from “a very physical relationship” to a nearly non-physical relationship, this shift did not damage hir relationship and the physical behaviours were replaced with non-physical behaviours that still captured the intimacy the previous behaviours generated. The two adapted to ensure a balance and meet their relationship goals. Further, the physical acts were not critical to Aeron’s relationship goals as it was hir partner who introduced them into the relationship and so the shift in interaction had little impact on the social exchange within the intimate relationship for Aeron. Also, because of Aeron’s overall goal of companionship, the negotiation of exchanges of behaviour did not come at a cost of the love within the relationship. The presence or absence of non-sexual physical behaviours had little impact on the overall exchange rate for Aeron. Further, the pair found ways to create the same intimacy in alternative ways, which can create increased stability in relationships.

Platonic intimate relationships have the closeness and maintenance behaviours involved in platonic friendships with the relationship maintenance and structure seen in friends-with-benefits relationships. Aeron, like the majority of my asexual participants in platonic intimate relationships, structured hir relationship goals around companionship and balanced hir interactions so that ze could achieve that goal. Rather than finding a relationship purely through heteronormative practices or positioning himself entirely within the transgressiveness that comes from hir queer identity/ies, Aeron instead located a relationship that met hir particular needs and allowed these needs to change as the relationship grew.

Platonic intimate relationships are useful models for thinking about co-opting aspects of the public story and practices of transgression because they start from a bit of both. Normally there is a person or persons who wants to fulfil the ideals of an intimate relationship, but has particular boundaries that are inconsistent with the HPS. This means that these relationships also start from a place of transgression. The framework, however, does offer new ways of thinking about what can be the goal of an intimate relationship. In practice, many people’s goals are not entirely fixed to the HPS, but the social expectations of desire can create a personal coercion that stifles some of the pleasure goals. By examining intimate relationships that emphasise plurality and non-normative goals, there is the potential for saturation of non-normative relationship structures, the introduction of alternative ways of doing relationships and increased acceptance of practices outside the HPS.

Looking instead at the practices among my participants in mixed relationships, there were examples of how individuals might establish non-normative goals. This largely encompassed communication around pleasure and an emphasis on non-sexual pleasure. Pre-AVEN, asexuals had very little language to challenge the public story. Jay (2003, p. 4) argues that there was “an inability to articulate nonsexual desires,<sup>125</sup> annoyance with socially ubiquitous notions of fulfilment through sexuality and frustration at the lack of information publicly about sexuality”. One of my participants, ADP, similarly mentioned:

I’ve seen more that my lack of sexual attraction has colored everyday interactions with other people and made me feel outside of society at times because of messages that assume that everyone experiences physical/sexual attraction. I’ve also come to see greater complexity within the community [...]. It’s a constant effort to articulate our experiences with different kinds of attraction, to understand ourselves and each other and to make ourselves understood to those outside of the community.

Both pre-AVEN and through their [continued] development, asexual communities have led to the formation of new language and terminology around sexuality. The growth of asexuality has introduced an attention to different types of attraction. Rather than assuming a naturalness of sexual attraction, the emergence of asexuality as a sexual orientation brought attention to the variations between aesthetic attraction, romantic attraction, sexual attraction, etc. Through their discussion of often seemingly heteronormative relationships in non-normative language, asexuals have encouraged the growth of social understandings of sexuality and intimate relationships. This growth provides an acceptable means through which one can communicate pleasure, whether discussing sexual or not.

Part of successful communication involved increasing the value of non-sexual practices. Previously I explained how some asexuals discussed developing compromises around sex. Some of these compromises encouraged non-asexual partners to participate in practices that were pleasure-driven by the asexual partner(s). For example, my ex and I had an arrangement that I always got hair brushing after sex and normally for longer than the sex. Other participants discussed being tickled, receiving back massages,

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<sup>125</sup> Once again, I resist the use of the word “desire” and instead reframe this to refer to a meaning of pleasure.

cuddling. I found that my participants would partake in seemingly heteronormative behaviour but for the reward of interactions that they sometimes defined as “better than an orgasm” (Kippa). Xaida detailed this exchange in particular and its significance to her relationship satisfaction:

The point of Xaida time is actually that we always do, what I feel like and need at that moment (and he pretends to enjoy it ;)). What it is then at the end is secondary. I also have to think at this very moment, what exactly it is that would cause me greatest pleasure then. It is sometimes the obvious: cuddling, kissing some body parts I tell him (especially often on the forehead), lifting me up and carrying me around, taking a bath together, foot massages, soft petting at the places I tell him or exploring something sexual I expect could be fun to me for some reason, but often it is really something very unphysical. E.g. my work contains so much talking and thinking about food, that I badly need distraction and I use my 30 minutes to get him tell me stories about turtles, chewing gum or South American rainforests. Once I remember I had an emotional problem to talk through with him - usually we do that without compensation, of course - but this specific problem we had talked through that often, that I preferred to use my 30 minutes to talk it through a last time and he had to pretend to enjoy it. Sometimes he has to do a duty call for me or anything else I'm really frantic about. And once he had to dance for me. [...] We very much stick to the half an hour for both. Although we are mostly done with [his] time in 10 to 20 minutes, but he says emotionally it corresponds to the half an hour he gives me.

“Xaida time” was an opportunity for exploring one’s pleasures or momentary inclinations. Together Xaida and her partner identified one another’s needs and created a balance between. This practice of creating a balance is a slight adjustment of views of the intimate partnership as being one that is solely for the individual. Rather than a model of pleasure being entirely about the self, building a relationship around pleasure involves open communication and ensuring the costs and rewards are distributed in such a way that is acceptable to the partners. Xaida and her partner both recognised that she would always get 30 minutes whereas sometimes he would only have 10, but her partner communicated how the time is not a direct measure of the work involved.

Practices such as “Xaida time” reportedly changed how partners saw the behaviours they were asked to do.<sup>126</sup> Much in the way an asexual might provide sex for a partner and experience satisfaction in the partner’s pleasure, the opposite was seen here. It would be interesting to explore how these behaviours are perceived by intimate partners directly and whether the behaviours take on new meanings, but either way, practices like “Xaida time” force non-normative interactions into the heteronormative framework.

Part of creating a pleasure framework that is de-centred from a necessarily pro-sex stance is through the displacement of physical intimacy. Xaida, for example, had a particular preference for talking about nonissues/random topics, which was emotionally relaxing for her and intellectually amusing. I identified a pattern among my participants of either (1) taking heteronormative practices and invoking new meanings into them (similar to the transgressive practices like removing focus away from the male orgasm) and (2) creating an emphasis on other types of intimacies to generate safe spaces for the exploration of non-normative pleasure preferences.

A framework around pleasure can include physical practices, but I found that my participants often changed the purpose/goal of physical interactions. Physical intimacy was particularly relevant to my participants’ experience of romantic attraction. Almost all of my participants initiated and took part in non-sexual physical behaviours with the intention of developing physical intimacy. Some of my participants defined these behaviours as “romantic behaviours”. Romantic behaviours [in relation to physical intimacy] involved all those behaviours that were seen as physical, but non-sexual and participated in to create closeness. These behaviours included cuddling (mentioned by approximately one third of my participants), hugging, kissing, back rubs, holding hands, lying together (sometimes nude [Suedoenimh, Geeske]), etc. Geeske explained how these types of behaviours spurred intimacy for her:

Sometimes, on a Saturday morning (or Sunday morning), we like hugging each other butt-naked in bed, just because we love feeling the warmth of our bodies, and it is something intimate that we share. By that, we show that we trust each other. You may be surprised, but we are asexual, and not a couple of prudes! As we are naked, one might consider that to be a sexual behaviour. For us, we just

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<sup>126</sup> Like many of my participants, I really enjoy having my head stroked/hair brushed. I have noticed that my partner has increased his practice, understanding and willingness of this behaviour to please me instead of reverting to more heteronormative practices such as kissing.

hug without any clothes. It is about feeling the warmth of our bodies and to express the trust that we have in each other. There are no sexual feelings attached to that behaviour, nor does it lead to having sex. [...] Being engaged in such behaviours is a sign of trust. You should yourself in a vulnerable way, so trust is needed. Besides, those behaviours are intimate behaviours that you do not (easily) do with other people, so it is something between my partner and me, and no one else. We feel that therefore, it strengthens our relationship.

As participants discussed their romantic behaviours, they sometimes fell into similar patterns as Geeske, where they found it was significant to emphasise that a behaviour was not viewed as sexual and/or how it could fluctuate in meaning. Heart (demi-female, 23, Canadian-English) similarly explained that with one of her partners, cuddling “can be more about sexuality than romanticism”, but with another partner, it may be neither. Whether or not a behaviour was experienced as romantic, sexual or platonic, it still had the potential to lead to physical intimacy. By recognising how behaviours mean different things with various partners or with the same partner at different times, my participants were demonstrating a model of viewing behaviours and practices in non-pre-established categories. Freeing behaviours from their categories—like thinking of sex as nonsexual—means that practices are not assumed to fulfil particular interests, participation in the practices do not establish any single desire (e.g. asexuals having sex does not somehow make them sexual), and the intention behind these practices can be fully realised.

The most commonly reported non-sexual [romantic] physical behaviour was cuddling/snuggling. Ea explained: “I really like hugging and snuggling [...] I usually end up falling asleep, and I would call that a successful intimate evening”. Alex (female, 23, Canadian) joked that she is a “cuddle whore”, appropriating sexual language to discuss her own non-sexual interactions. Although only mentioned by a third of my participants, the high frequency of cuddling highlights how physical behaviours can be critical to some persons’ pleasure in their intimate relationship, but this is significant because it is participated in for non-sexual purposes. The active redefining of pleasure—further aided by the appropriation of sexual and/or heteronormative language—is yet another way for how pleasure can be at the centre of intimate relationships instead of desire.

Sometimes participants were involved in physical practices, but enjoyed them for non-physical and non-sexual reasons. In Chapter 3, I discussed how intelligence was

one of the most sought after characteristic in an intimate partner reported by my participants. This corresponded to a high incidence of expressed intellectual intimacy and/or desire for intellectual intimacy. Intellectual intimacy (also known as cognitive intimacy) can include sharing ideas as Greeff and Melherbe (2001, p. 250) define it, but I would also expand this definition to include behaviours that are participated in with the purpose of stimulating intellectual inquiry and closeness with/through one's intimate relationship. I chose to expand the definition because of the high incidence of reported participation in physical behaviours, particularly sexual acts, that were performed with the intention of or the motivation of intellectual curiosity and intimacy.

In their study on asexuals, Brotto et al. (2010, p. 610) found that "several reported wanting the closeness, companionship, intellectual, and emotional connection that comes from romantic relationships". Like Brotto et al. (2010), I identified a high incidence of desired intellectual exchange and enquiry. Brotto et al. (2010) argues that the wants expressed by their participants were not that different from "sexual individuals who desire closeness and intimacy", but the frequency with which my participants desired intellect and intellectual exchange from a partner(s) suggested that for at least asexuals, intellectual intimacy was prioritised often over physical intimacy.

Some of my participants discussed the importance of intellectual inquiry and/or exchange when performing in physical, particularly sexual ways. Sometimes this was purely curiosity with no interest in intellectual engagement. Suedoenimh (agender female, 56, American) discussed how she "tried intercourse with male partners twice for the sake of curiosity". Others, such as Kippa (cisgender female, 25, American), sought someone who could provide direct intellectual engagement and closeness. She explained:

I also LOVE to tease. I like to sexually tease my partner. I find it very intellectually fascinating. I love understanding how if I move my body a certain way it elicits a particularly response from my partner. For me it is such a game. I get really bored and annoyed, though, if my partner acts upon the teasing. [...] I want more game-play interactions. Sex is only meaningful to me when I can make it intellectually engaging. I am working on convincing my partner to introduce more of those features into our sexual relationship.

For Kippa, sexual acts were means by which she could attain intellectual intimacy. She elicited pleasure from the intellectual game. She also used intellectual intimacy to give greater meaning to her sexual encounters. In this way, physical behaviours do not have to equate to physical intimacy, but instead can lead to other intimacy types such as what is seen here. Further, practices that are publicly understood through singular lenses—or categories as I referred to them earlier—can be re-examined.

Attention to other types of intimacies such as intellectual, emotional, social, etc. is critical for a pleasure model to work. If the plurality of an individual's and couple's needs are not fully acknowledged, then a pleasure framework cannot move past an association purely with the physical. This would then fail to challenge the heteronormative public story. Through their attention the other types of intimacies within their heteronormative frameworks, asexuals in mixed relationships actively call attention to the variety of pleasure in an intimate relationship and the realisation of goals extending beyond skewed expectations of physical closeness.

### *5.6 Conclusion*

I began my analysis of practices within an intimate relationships contemplating if other asexuals displayed equally seemingly heteronormative intimate relationships as me. I was curious if there was something particularly asexual about them as well as whether they were transgressive/subversive. I was interested in this analysis so as to locate asexuality within or against the heteronormative public story. While I was hopeful that a transgressive or even a subversive narrative would arise from my analysis,<sup>127</sup> the way my participants' intimate practices straddled both heteronormativity and transgression was a more compelling find and likely a more productive direction for challenging the heteronormative public story.

Throughout this chapter I articulated practices that were seemingly or intentionally heteronormative. Eighteen of 29 of my participants had been or were in mixed relationships, and at some point had engaged in sexual acts for physically intimate purposes, but often it was not their intimate needs that were the goal of these acts. Asexuals in these mixed relationships upheld the HPS through (1) a compromise of their self (e.g. not challenging unwanted practices that were in accordance with the HPS, co-opting gender expectations) and (2) through the replication of a narrative of

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<sup>127</sup> I was hopeful because I still hold some antagonistic feelings toward the HPS.

intimacy and intimate practice(s) consistent with the HPS despite preferences that contradicted these narratives.

I found that some of my participants took part in unwanted physical interactions because of their assumption of required performance of sexual intimacy, but I also found that sometimes participants resisted physical intimacy because of concern with how their participation could be seen as contradictory to their identity and/or sexual orientation. Both are problematic in the ways they uphold the HPS: the former for its maintenance of the HPS, especially in regards to gendered performances, and the latter for the way it co-opts assumptions of others and framing of intimate practices.

I noticed my participants tended to reproduce the heteronormative narrative through practices like equating the whole of intimacy to physicality despite alternative experiences and preferences. This was further problematised in the construction of the initiator as the sexual partner, or solely in relation to sexual interactions. The coupling of initiator and sexual interactions undermines asexuals' agency and de-values non-sexual interactions.<sup>128</sup> It also risks undervaluing these interactions in preference for the sexual interactions. I then demonstrated how all of these practices, initiations and expectations exist in a grey spectrum of consent. Because of asexuals' approach to sex from a generally ambivalent or ambiguous position, consent can sometimes be unclear. Further, asexuals repeated intimate practice of unwanted consensual activity challenges what can and cannot or should and should not be constituted as sexual assault and/or rape.

As much as my participants demonstrated heteronormative practices that upheld the HPS, they also exhibited transgressive and/or subversive practices that sought to challenge or undermine it. Subversion and/or transgression were encountered in three primary forms: (1) formation of non-normative relationships, (2) practices of reframing heteronormativity, and (3) perceptions and practices that challenge what is constituted as sexual. Because of the emphasis on non-normative relationships such as polyamorous, reframed heteronormative practices such as rejecting penetrative sex for other sexual practices, and new ways of understanding what is or is not counted as sexual, asexuality has the transgressive and/or subversive ability of extending the boundaries of the intimate relationship. While not exclusive to asexuality, the frequency of these practices and the displacement of the sexual at the core of the public story

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<sup>128</sup> If a practice or interaction is not deemed as something that is "initiated", it is first off already marked as less significant to the relationship given that it is not part of its narrative, but it also ignores the emotional effort of giving embedded in the interaction.



offers greater opportunity for exploring the complexity and nuance of what is the intimate relationship, what practices can, cannot or should relate to it and who is the intimate partner(s).

A transgressive or subversive framework, however, was not as helpful for a practical approach to challenging the heteronormative framework, much in the way that total revolution can be philosophically nearly impossible. Instead, an analysis of the overlap in heteronormative and transgressive/subversive practices is a more useful model. I suggested that this analysis allows for a new framework around pleasure that is derived from the practices and languages discovered in asexuals' intimate relationships. The framework starts first with a rejection of desire as a starting point for an intimate relationship. Desire, as Beasley et al. (2016) argued, is inherently tied to the sexual. This connection is unhelpful asexuals and restricts the way an intimate relationship can be formed and framed. Pleasure, however, can be expanded to include notions of desire if relevant to a person, while displacing notion of "good"/"best" versus "bad"/ "worst" views of intimate practices, singular experience(s) and increases the importance of non-sexual pleasure.

A pleasure model for intimate relationships would begin from the bones of the HPS and then transgress as the meat. This would mean recognising possible partners and developing those relationships based on the self that needed that sought the intimacy created therein. A framework that had such a broad definition of pleasure at its core would mean an immediate expansion of the term an intimate partner with the possible inclusion of close/deep friendships. This framework rejects the notion of "the one" and adjusts the purpose of the intimate relationship. While sexual intimacy could be a possible goal for some people, others could be just as validated in their platonic pleasures of companionship.

Framing relationships around pleasure recognises the way in which pleasure is not static: pleasure is a fluid experience that is not true of all repeated interactions, every day with the same person or others. Thus there can be no one true way of doing relationships and/or being intimate. Further, by examining intimate relationships from a perspective of non-sexual pleasure, other practices can saturate the public story. Such a model would however require effective communication, self-reflection, and in many ways, it is a privileged model. Not everyone is in a position to have a framework of intimate relationships designed around pleasure, but I would argue that parts of it are still applicable given the new values that would be placed on close friendships, extended

views of what constitutes a “family” and/or living arrangements and more nuanced intimacies.

## ***Chapter 6: Conclusion***

This is not me. I am not here. I have a voice, but nowhere in these pages and pages does it truly sound. How have I become so separated from this work on my own identity? Was it a mistake to not be my own participant, to exclude myself, to position myself as outside (as if that gave the work some sort of credibility—not sure why in reflection)? And what really have I done with their stories? Have I actually touched them? Did I just want to tell them? Hello, world! This is I, asexuality?!...with the irony being my absence? Perhaps that was all just a clever ploy borne out of my identity as a writer.

In truth, it's merely that I AM absent. I have denied myself the ability to be in my work, to breathe into it and wrap myself up and around in it and it, I. It is an injustice to write this as a way of giving back to the community that helped me find myself and then to have it be so devoid of me.

So how do I fix it? How does it *become*? ...And how do I do the becoming?

Do I tell my entire story? Do I describe my own prescribed heteronormativity, my love for sex but distaste for assumed sexual intimacy? Do I read my own identity onto what others say to charm my readers into thinking that I am somehow a legitimate asexual, if not *the*? That really may be the cusp of my issue there: do I feel a need to tell it/not tell it as if to assert some sort of knowing?

And what of the moments where I am the outlier, the contradiction, the mess in the bed of this sex[less]iness? Do I sweep those under? Confront? Do I risk my reader thinking I the more correct source opposed to my participants?

Hello, world! What do I do? Asexuality is knocking. Am I there, too?

- Danielle Maxwell, PhD Journal, November 2015

## *6.1 Finding my asexuality*

When I wrote the journal entry above, this (my thesis) was radically different from what it is now. As the piece suggests, I was largely absent from the text. I began my research wanting to create a separation between myself and my participants so as to not force what they said into being consistent with my asexual identity. I further did not want my own identity to be overly evident to my participants or my readers; I wanted my participants' stories to be at the core of my research. However, as an asexual, I do have a position of knowing that is worthwhile to my analysis and rejecting that was not only hurting a deeper analysis, but it was halting my ability to produce. The writing process up to that point was very much like an experience of identity denial.

Then it changed.

Now you have heard some of my story, dotted throughout each chapter. You have also read creative sections at the beginning of my analysis chapters. These creative pieces are rooted in my own experience; they are representative of the struggles and/or niceties of my own asexual experience. Like many of my participants, I felt I had been a constant actor throughout my early life. I kept diligent [mental] notes of human interactions, studied some of the intimacies of my peers and culture, developed a precise understanding of expected interactions. This "knowledge" then informed my early attempts at intimate relationships. What was missing in my participants' narratives, though, was an absence of the full complexity of the experience of performing a non-self.

Now honestly, I have never experienced the struggles of bingeing or any eating disorder, but the consumption and constant painful regurgitation of my [sexual] performance(s) was an endless cycle. It was a cycle that made me feel powerless, hopeless, even pain. See, some of the researchers I mentioned who are part of the contemporary asexual research landscape have demonstrated an interest in or have researched [poor] mental health in relation to asexuality. The idea of the research is to explore a causal relationship, and in many ways, this assumption is not too far off. When individuals are stuck in a cycle of powerlessness, pain and hopelessness, that experience can manifest into poor mental health. My piece suggests that once "asexuality" can break through the door there is that narrative of relief as discussed within my chapter, but that is a bit overly simplistic. Asexuality can seem a saviour, the trope of the knight in shining armour, but like this trope, it fails to recognise the process of life. Coming to personal terms with asexuality is not necessarily immediate, does not mean you are any more or less accepted, any more or less in a position of knowing, any

more or less able to be how you want to be, especially in a culture dominated by the HPS.

But you try. So my second piece was about the overwhelming sensation that occurs at the next stage. You—an asexual—want to enter an intimate relationship. Here are all these messages that reflect an experience of intimate relationships that are generally inconsistent with your sense of self. What do you do? It can truly be an endless hunt for the unicorn. I am happy that I have found personally and among my participants that it does not have to be as difficult as locating a unicorn, perhaps just a pangolin.<sup>129</sup> I am fortunate enough to have access to the communities and the materials I need to articulate my preferences; I am very self-aware and reflected on what I wanted and what that would look like in a partner. I then possessed the ability to articulate those preferences. When I sought a new intimate partner last summer (Summer 2016), I did not hunt for a unicorn. Instead, I emphasised my position as an asexual, despite my personal distaste for marking myself as an “other”,<sup>130</sup> and outlined what my own pleasure framework might be/look like. My current partner accepts my identity, but is a skilful pangolin in the way he ignores his own preconceived notions and views our relationship strictly from our intimate practices rather than our sexual orientations. In comparison, my ex was more like the African lion that toyed with its prey, hoping to woo it over before devouring.

The flash fiction (my third creative production) was a really important piece for me to add. It is fairly reflective of my own and my participants’ intimate practices, particularly when it comes to physical intimacy. I knew I wanted to include something that reflected the positive intimate experience. So much of this thesis recounts the struggle of coming to terms with and finding a space for asexuality. I needed something that demonstrated the happiness and joy of an intimate experience but was still consistent with an asexual experience. I intentionally designed the text so that it was reflective of a rather true interaction of mine and would engage me readers’ own positions. By deceiving my reader until the very end—by burying the intimate experience in an assumed sexual narrative structure—I utilised the surprise element to challenge a reader’s expectations and cultural assumptions. I did not want this thesis to

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<sup>129</sup> A pangolin is one of the most endangered species as of January 2017.

<sup>130</sup> I believe self-disclosure should go both ways. If it is important for me to mark my sexual orientation, so too should it be for my intimate partner. On the dating websites I used, however, you did have to select your orientation, but I consistently found that people assumed my heterosexuality despite my side bar stating asexual. To clarify, I noted my asexual identity within my summary.

just be about how my participants engage with the HPS, but also how my own readers are equally susceptible to its influence.<sup>131</sup>

So here I am. Establishing my voice was crucial to the work and its (hopeful) success. Even now as I converse with you rather than present myself in an academic frame, I invite you into this narrative, to experience the train of thought of my asexual positioning. I did not, however, expect that I would be inviting myself. Throughout this research, my understanding of both my asexuality as an orientation and as a social identity transformed. Initially my introduction framed me solely as an indifferent asexual, but I never realised that that term is so empty. To say I am indifferent to sex is not really what I mean. I am generally indifferent to the sexual intimacy of sex, but I love everything else. I am indifferent to sex being at the core of my intimate relationship. I now believe, though, that I would never want an intimate relationship completely absent of sex because of the range of other forms of intimacy and experience I acquire from the interaction.

Prior to this research I also never would have called my experiences with my previous partner “rape”. It was not until I found myself making judgements about my participants’ experiences that I realised I needed to come to terms with my own (not to mention how problematic it was to make those judgements in the first place). In my discussion around consent, I noted how I had an assumption of rape as a traumatic experience. It was difficult to recognise that not saying yes could fully equate to saying no, especially in a relationship where my partner and I acknowledged my general ambivalence. I am still not fully sure if I am somewhat responsible for my own rape(s) given the way I had structured or allowed for the structuring of [penetrative] sex in our relationship. No matter, it was still rape.

I am asexual. I define that not as a lack of sexual attraction, but instead as having a non-directed libido. Because of this research I have learned how to move my definition away from an absence to an active position. I am heteroromantic, which means that I prefer male partners. I recognise that part of that is rooted in the HPS, if not all. A major contributing factor is my desire for biological children, but how much of that comes from a construction of womanhood that stems from the HPS?

I am sexually active, which in no way takes away from my sexual orientation or identity, though a good portion of the asexual community (predominantly in the groups forming/growing on social media) rejects my position. This is the most difficult to

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<sup>131</sup> If you—as a reader—were not jarred a bit upon discovering that it was a hair brush/brushing, then I congratulate you on your ability to sit outside the HPS.

defend and uphold. Every week it seems there is a new article posted in newspapers/journals that discuss asexuality from an absence of sexual practice. Each time, this material is shared and consumed within the online asexual communities. Every single time I rant and rave about the way it limits the asexual experience and how problematic it is to construct sexual orientation from a position of practice (not to mention impossible!). But very few listen. Nonetheless, I am no more or less asexual than them, but I hope that my articulation of the complexity of the asexual experience, of framings of intimate partnering and the intimate relationship within this thesis, invites greater depth into asexual practices and understanding. It certainly brought greater depth to me.

## *6.2 What is asexuality?*

The goal of my research was to understand how asexuals construct intimate relationships, but this was complicated by the complex and varied understandings of what asexuality means/is. Contemporary researchers established that there are inconsistent definitions of how asexuality is or ought to be defined. These definitions include: (1) “a person who does not have a sex drive and has never had one, and hence does not experience sexual urges or desire (and in particular, does not masturbate)” (Hinderliter, 2009b, 3); (2) a person who has “little or no sex-drive” (Hinderliter, 2009a, p. 6); (3) a person who has little or no sexual attraction; (4) a person who self-identifies as asexual (Hinderliter, 2009b, p. 6); and (5) a person who has no desire to act on their sexual attraction (Scherrer, 2008). What I found problematic with these definitions is none appeared to distinguish how asexuality operates in different ways. Scott et al. (2016) and Dawson et al. (2016) both present a view of asexuality as a social identity, which was significant for analysing my own participants views and formulating an accurate definition that reflected the multiple experiences of asexuality. Further, they define asexuality around an absence.

For the point of my research, I analysed asexuality as both a sexual orientation and a social identity. This is important because it influences/changes the meaning asexuality has in people’s lives, and my research shows how it may be critical for future research to consider a similar approach. For example, I noted how Scott et al. (2016) offer an analysis of a sub-group of asexuals for whom an asexual social identity was not relevant, but posit it as a process of non-becoming. I instead argued that this may relate to a largely absent intimate practice. As I am interested in intimate relationships, I focused more on discussions related to orientation, but acknowledged how identity

played a key role in partner selection practices, including those related to disclosure and boundary articulation. Asexuality as a sexual orientation was a useful focus because it most related to individuals' sexualities. No matter the position a researcher takes, however, they need to consider that asexuality can have multiple meanings; it too is a plural self.

My approach was derived in response to my participants' mixed and sometimes vague definitions of asexuality. Asexuality was often defined as a lack of sexual attraction, but there was a pattern of participants explaining this as a lack of participation in sex. I realised this partly related to uncertainty around the meaning of sexual attraction, but more importantly, an emphasis in the absence of sexual interactions often related to a practice of repulsion and/or an absence of an intimate relationship at the time of interviewing. Those who identified purely around a lack of sexual attraction instead offered a distinction between sexual attraction and libido. This distinction was also helpful for forming a view of asexuality that did not have to reflect an absence as is posited by communities such as AVEN. By restructuring a definition of asexuality as a sexual orientation around non-directed libido, I encourage a conversation around sexuality.

I found that asexuality as an identity emerged from discussions of asexuality as an essential aspect of the self; they "discovered" their asexuality rather than "became" asexual. While essentialist views such as this are problematic, an essentialist framing of asexuality is the attempt to assert a somehow more legitimate identity. This identity was most often present among those who discussed participation in the online communities, both for pleasure and political activism. A social identity also appeared most evident among participants in intimate relationships, which I argued related to the discussions that asexuality forces on the HPS narrative of the intimate relationship. An asexual identity was likely if a person was experiencing direct challenges to their sexual orientation. Individuals were thus motivated to articulate, defend and work toward educating others on asexuality. This articulation led to a performative shift and adoption of an asexual social identity.

Through this analysis I show that an examination of asexuality requires recognition of its plurality. People vary in the way their asexuality operates and carries meaning for them. In an analysis of intimate relationships, both an asexual social identity and an understanding of asexuality as a sexual orientation are significant for investigating asexuals' intimate practices. However, my definitions do not examine asexuality's location within the wider heteronormative public story. When I started my



research I failed to distinguish between heteronormativity and heterosexuality, which was critical because heteronormativity impacts all forms of sexual orientations and intimate practices. That is, even if an intimate relationship was devoid of physical intimacy, there are still instances of heteronormative practice. A social asexual identity that gains significance because of the way it challenges the HPS raises questions as to what this identity means outside this structure. If asexuals did not have to articulate an experience of othering, would a social identity still be relevant? Further, if a sexual orientation takes on a social identity through the challenge of the HPS and other normative/oppressive structures, what does that add to an analysis of other sexual orientations (e.g. homosexuals where homosexuality is condemned)?

### *6.3 Asexual intimate practices as a way into nuanced intimate understandings*

I researched asexuals in intimate relationships first because there was a noticeable gap in the research which I sought to fill, but also because I was interested in what our understanding(s) of asexual intimate practices could add to wider discussions and/or practices of intimacy and the intimate relationship(s). Throughout my analysis, I evidence that there are four main areas where an exploration of asexual intimate practices can introduce new ways of doing intimate relationships: forms of attraction, partner preference practices, intimate partnering/relationship structures and a pleasure framework.

While not new to my research, my findings reinforce that asexuality is connected to practices of multiple forms of attraction. Because asexuality was defined through a lack of sexual attraction within an HPS framework that places sexual attraction at the centre of intimate partnering, asexuals sought other means of explaining their interest and participation in intimate relationships. This led to the emergence of other forms of attraction, such as romantic. As previously mentioned, Sundrud (2011, p. 13) outlines several different types of romantic orientations: bi-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to members of both sexes”); hetero-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to the opposite sex”); homo-romantic (“a person who is romantically attracted to the same sex”); and aromantic (“a person who does not experience romantic attraction”). However, what I contribute to this is a break from viewing romantic attraction as an orientation. I admit that I am guilty of citing it as an orientation on a personal level and throughout this thesis, but fixing romantic attraction to an orientation limits its fluidity. It associates romanticism with categories that would not be helpful if people absorbed a pleasure framework. For example, I identify as

hetero-romantic. I possess romantic attraction toward people—I have a want to provide romanticism for/toward my intimate partner—but I have complicated that romanticism by limiting it to hetero- intimate partners. By “hetero” I refer to partners of the opposite sex (although some also include gender), but the practice of orienting restricts our practice(s) of intimate partnering (i.e. I may not see my relationships with females for all the intimacy that they do and/or could provide). The qualifiers (e.g. “hetero”, “homo”) are also implicated in sexual practices. Despite using the prefix to refer to a romantic practice, it is nearly impossible to disentangle them from their sexual orientative roots.

An emphasis on aesthetic attraction is another form that is recognised within the asexual community. Aestheticism is once again not a new area, but because asexuals value discussions and demonstrate practices related to it, this attraction is then a larger part of intimate relationship practices. Many of my participants did not prefer particular aesthetic preferences, but did distinguish aesthetic attraction from sexual attraction. By positioning aesthetic attraction as an important feature (whether sought or not), asexual intimate practices change the conversation around the body to one which can be non-sexual, or at least to a position that is not singularly sexual. While not explored in my research, a broader examination of asexuals’ view of the body could point to aesthetic preferences that run contrary to the HPS.

I introduced my examination of asexual partner selection practices by relaying the series of questions that asexuals are confronted with when claiming their asexual orientation. I demonstrated that asexuals constantly confront the HPS when attempting to find and select intimate partners. I established that the “right person” was understood by my participants in a non-sexual and often even non-physical way. Gender and sex were significant for the way they often did not matter, aesthetics were generally related to non-normative beauty, and instead non-physical aspects of a partner were emphasised such as intelligence.

My participants sought intimate partners within pragmatic and proximal settings, friendship groups and online, but most partnering was accidental rather than intentional. This suggested a pattern of asexual practice that resisted intentional relationship formation, if not going as far as resisting relationship formation(s). In these instances, asexuals are being potentially combative toward the notion of “the right one”, but this argument fails given that most of my participants still wanted an intimate relationship. Instead, an inactive approach to intimate relationship formation likely points to the difficulty of finding one’s unicorn (pangolin). Much of intimate partner preference and

contemporary dating is incompatible with asexual preferences. For those asexuals who did take a more active role in finding an intimate partner, they turned to online communities and websites, generally because of the way it removed the body from the relationship-forming process. Thus, partner selection practices were distinctly asexual given their either opposition or avoidance of the HPS, but I showed that this was neither consistent with their practices nor with the social narratives they established about their intimate relationship(s).

With discussion around the body—and [penetrative] sex in particular—removed from the primary ways asexuals talked about their intimate relationships, other forms of intimacy and characteristics became the focal point(s). In his discussion on adult intimate love, Fletcher (2002) argues that people vary on how much they value traits [or features], but in my research I noticed a pattern. Particular traits, such as intelligence, were repeatedly mentioned. When discussing ideal personalities of partners, intelligence and/or intellectual conversationalist(s) were frequently discussed and sometimes at great length (over the spread of multiple lines). Many of my participants saw intelligence as instrumental for building intimacy. For example, I found that desire for an intelligent intimate partner was reflected in high levels of desire for intellectual intimacy and intellectual intimate practices. Because of its specificity to asexuality and its frequency among my participants, I titled this pattern of preference as an asexual-specific practice. That is not to say that non-asexual persons do not exhibit the same practices, but it does recognise that there is some aspect of the intellectual exchange and intellectual intimacy that is relevant to asexual's partner selection practices.

Understanding such an intense focus on intelligence by asexuals I argue is fundamental for expanding discussions around intimate relationships. Repeatedly I demonstrated how my participants constructed narratives consistent with the HPS despite their alternative practices. Analysing and considering other forms of intimacy within all types of intimate relationships has the potential to expand the public story. It could redistribute the value we give to specific types of intimacy. Rather than physical intimacy being central, appreciating other forms of intimacy could introduce new types of intimate relationships, practices and partnering.

In my third analysis chapter I showed how a transgressive model for exploring sexualities is not wholly helpful. Transgressive models reinforce an us/them mentality, a normative/non-normative fixation that only promotes othering. Further a transgressive model does not offer heterosexuality a solution for challenging and/or navigating the HPS. By examining asexuality's straddle of both heteronormativity and

transgressive/subversive practices, I posited that instead of upholding a purely transgressive model for challenging the HPS, it would be more practical and worthwhile to utilise the site of overlap for introducing a model of intimate relationships built around pleasure.

An approach that combines heteronormative practices with transgressive practices would (1) shift relationship patterns/structures, (2) create broader understandings of pleasure and include non-sexual pleasures as part of the intimate narrative, and (3) displace physical intimacy at the heart of the public story. Throughout my analysis of asexuals heteronormative and transgressive practices I showed how an overlap allows for the continuity of the intimate relationship, but an expansion of what it encompasses. Because it does not require an entirely revolutionary approach to intimate practices, implementation is a bit more accessible. Cynthia's polyamorous relationships were an opportunity to see how people can envision a plurality of selves and enter non-competitive, non-hierarchical intimate relationships. Ze's intimate relationships exhibited a varied practice of physical and non-physical intimacies and bodies/spaces, with hir triad existing almost entirely online. Aeron's platonic relationship(s) highlighted non-normative intimacies, but more importantly depicted a fluidity in intimate practice that is more reflective of the transitions that occur in our lives but is often absent from the public story. Through a combined approach, participants like Kippa can prefer a male partner, but be validated in their enjoyment of sex for intellectual intimacy. Non-sexual partners can be understood as "intimate", and our singular focus on "the one", a soulmate, is displaced by a view of multiplicity of self and partner.

#### *6.4 Where should asexual research go from here?*

When I first proposed this thesis, there were only two noticeable discussions of intimate relationship practices, most significantly from Brotto et al. (2010). I found that this work failed to offer an analysis of intimate practice selection process(es), did not question these practices at a deep level and generally were not discussed in relation to wider intimate practices. The struggle of this thesis was the need to be both informative of asexual intimate practices while also offering an analytical view that located asexual's intimate relationships within wider relationship frameworks, such as the HPS.

I demonstrated that asexuality is both heteronormative and transformative as well as posited a model for progressing forward in contemporary understandings of intimacy and intimate relationships more generally. However, research needs to

continue around asexual intimate practices. For example, my research failed to investigate singledom from an angle of sexuality. Often my single participants were not investigating or participating in many intimate practices and/or did not provide content that suggested they were. I did have one single participant, Michelle, who expressed distinctly active engagement in intimate practices and sexual interactions. Michelle was a member of her local BDSM<sup>132</sup> community. Because of my scope on intimate relationships, I was not able to include Michelle's practice of singlehood. An analysis of others like Michelle would help compile a deeper understanding of how practices are framed, especially if performed for reasons outside relationship goals/maintenance and/or the HPS. Alternatively, these communities could be sites of extended intimate relationship structures. Either way, I could not provide a deeper discussion, but there is evidently something going on here. An analysis around singledom in the asexual community might also challenge my arguments around the operation of an asexual social identity. Based on my participants, I argued that a social identity was most relevant within intimate relationship practices, but individuals like Michelle may challenge this conclusion.

Although I offered a direction for rethinking the intimate relationship, this model would benefit from studies that cross sexualities. It would be particularly useful to engage a similar framework from a more recent analysis of heterosexuality, possibly in combination with asexual participants. Prior to work on homo-, pan-, bi- sexualities, I would suggest an exploration of identity versus sexual orientation as I found among my asexual participants. This would ensure that the focus of the practices relates to one's sexual orientation rather than a social identity. More generally, my work raises questions as to the necessity of researching specific sexual orientations when practices are not found to be entirely specific to an orientation. A movement away from this positioning—one I myself could benefit from—is critical for larger challenges to the intimate relationship paradigm.

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<sup>132</sup> Role plays that include bondage, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism.

Does my identity matter? Jim<sup>133</sup> and I don't discuss it anymore, not since we first started dating. Sometimes I see myself forgetting. Once my PhD is over will I think my work is done? Will I abandon the community? Will I lose what I have since found?

I appreciate what it's given me (or I have given to it?). I think I would have settled in my prior intimate relationship; I would have bound myself to a heteronormative practice. I would have lost myself to the abusive structure. My orientation—a term I now struggle to use after contemplating intimacy in non-oriented ways—will likely always be constant. And I suppose for that it will still matter, somewhere in the back of my mind...and bound up in these pages. Here I am. This is me. Hello, asexuality.

- Danielle Maxwell, PhD Journal, 30 January 2017

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<sup>133</sup> Jim is my current partner.

## Appendices

### **Agreement to Participate in It's not just about sex: Asexual identity and intimate relationship practices**

**What is the purpose of the study?** The purpose of this study is to explore asexuality in the context of intimate relationships and gain an understanding of what it means to identify as asexual in an intimate relationship. This survey is part one of the study and an optional online interview is part two. The survey is designed to first establish an overview of the term “asexuality” as it is understood by participants, and then will attempt to gain a basic understanding of asexuals in intimate relationships. Participants can then choose to participate in part two of the study, which involves in-depth e-mail interviews asking more detailed questions, such as what kinds of [sexual] behaviours participants engage in and what role these behaviours play in their intimate relationships.

**Who is eligible to participate?** To be in this study, participants must identify or have identified as an asexual while in an intimate relationship of at least 6 continuous months. Participants must also be 18 years or older and proficient in English.

**What will participation in the study involve?** During the study, you will be asked to answer demographic and open-ended questions on a survey hosted by SurveyMonkey, focusing on your understanding of your asexuality and how it relates to your experience of intimate relationships. The survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the online survey, you will have the option to participate in a follow-up email interview where you will be asked more detailed questions about your intimate relationships. If interested, you may provide an email address at the conclusion of this survey.

**What are the potential risks of participation?** This study presents minimal risks. Participants will discuss potentially sensitive, personal information, which might lead to distress. Because the questions are in an open-ended format, it may be possible to identify individuals from their responses. There is also a security risk in creating, processing and storing information online. To reduce these risks, I will ask you to create

a pseudonym for yourself and to consider, if completing part 2 of this study, what email address you wish to correspond from to further protect your identity. This will allow your identity to stay concealed. Further, if at any time you wish to withdraw from the research, you can contact me with that pseudonym, and I will be able to retract your survey responses. To protect your data, I urge all participants to ensure that they use strong passwords, deleting files as needed, and logging off both their email accounts and computers.

**Is participation voluntary?** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study until October 2015 or refuse to answer any particular question for any reason.

**Will participation be kept confidential?** To protect your identity, I will not be collecting any identifying information beyond demographical information, but this information will be presented in a way that is not associated with participants directly. At the conclusion of the email interviews, personal email addresses will be deleted from my files. However, it is important to know that some of the responses given may appear in direct quotation within my thesis and related publications, but this will be entirely anonymised.

**Who can be contacted for further queries?** If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact Danielle Maxwell, PhD student at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York at dm874@york.ac.uk. The University of York ethics committee has approved this project. You may print and keep a copy of this consent form.

#### \*1. ELECTRONIC CONSENT

Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

1. You understand the above information and you have no further questions about participation on this research project.
2. You voluntarily consent to participate in this research.
3. You are at least 18 years of age, proficient in English, and have been in at least a continuous 6+ month intimate relationship.



## Research Questions – Survey and Interview

### Part 1: Online Survey Questions

#### Demographic:

1. What is your biological sex?
2. What gender do you identify as?
3. What is your (a)sexual orientation?
4. What is your (a)romantic orientation?

#### Asexuality:

1. How do you define asexuality?
2. How do you see yourself within this definition? Does it reflect your self-perception of asexuality? (Please explain)
3. How old were you when you first heard the term “asexual”?
4. Where did you hear this term?
5. How did you come to realize you were asexual?
6. Have your social interactions changed since identifying or while identifying as asexual and, if so, how?

#### Intimate Relationships:

1. How many intimate relationships have you been in where you identified as an asexual?
2. How long did each of those relationships last?
3. What was the sexual orientation of your partner(s)?
4. What was the romantic orientation of your partner(s)? (If you are aware)
5. Was your identity as an asexual important to your relationship(s)? (Please explain)
6. Are there any behaviours that you perceive as conventionally sexual, but personally not sexual? If so, which? (e.g., masturbation, oral sex, etc.)

## Part 2: E-mail Interview Questions:

### Partners:

1. How do you choose your (a)romantic partners?
2. What would be your ideal partner?
3. In what ways do you find your partners attractive?
  - a.) Does this influence your partner selection?

### Intimate Relationships:

1. How do you generally understand the position or performance of an asexual in a relationship?
2. How do you negotiate practices like flirting and dating?
3. Has your performance of sexuality changed since identifying (or while you identified) as an asexual, and, if so, in what ways?
4. Do you and, if so, how do you communicate your identity as an asexual to your partner?
  - a.) If not, why don't you?
5. How do you and your partner share intimate moments?
6. What type of intimate behaviours do you engage in with your partner and which of these behaviours do you perceive as sexual?
7. Who generally initiates intimate behaviours?
  - a.) Which behaviours do you initiate, if any?
8. How do you understand your sexual orientation in relation to your partner?
  - a.) Do the two of you commonly discuss your orientations?
9. How does your partner's orientation impact on you within your intimate relationship?

### Motivations:

1. What are your reasons for wanting or being in an intimate relationship?
2. What are your long-term goals for your relationships? (e.g., marriage, children, etc.)
3. How do you decide on what intimate behaviours to compromise on with or for your partner?
4. What motivates you to participate in sexual behaviours?

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