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Authors	Kelleher, Sinéad;Murphy, Mike;Murphy, Raegan
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Variations in Sexual Identity Milestones Among Asexual People

Sinéad Kelleher^{a*}, Mike Murphy^b and Raegan Murphy^b

^a*School of Psychology, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland*

^b*School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland*

Sinéad Kelleher, Corresponding Author, School of Psychology, Dublin City University, Glasnevin Campus, D9, Dublin, Ireland. Sinead.kelleher@ucc.ie

Sinéad Kelleher is a Post-doctoral researcher in Dublin City University. Her research interests include human sexuality, developmental psychology, and psychometrics. ORCID identifier: 0000-0001-8652-6238

Mike Murphy is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Psychology, Chartered Psychologist, and C-Director of the Masters Programme in Positive & Coaching Psychology, in University College Cork, Ireland. His research interests include human sexuality, social support, and positive & coaching psychology. ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-8379-3813

Raegan Murphy is a chartered Psychologist and associate fellow with the BPS. She currently co-ordinates and lectures Individual Differences, Psychometrics and Psychological assessment. Her interests are the nature of psychological measurement and assessment. ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-6442-7957

Abstract

There is increasing interest in the interpersonal factors that shape the development of asexual individual's sexual identity, including age, gender, and romantic orientation. In this study, we examined variability in timing and pacing of asexual identity development milestones, with a focus on the diversity present in the asexual population. Among a sample of 317 participants aged 18-59 from three distinct birth cohorts, we measured participants' ages of asexual identity development milestones, including: first awareness of a lack of sexual attraction, first searching for orientation, first discovery of the term asexuality, first self-identification, and, first disclosure. Participants from more recent cohorts reported earlier and accelerated pacing of milestones relative to those from middle and older cohorts. Subgroups defined by gender also varied in milestone timing, with cisgender participants experiencing asexual identity development milestones at a later age than gender non-binary cohorts. No significant difference in milestones were found among romantic orientation sub-groups, apart from the timing of identity disclosure. Romantic-identified asexual individuals disclosed their asexual identities much sooner than aromantic-identified asexual individuals following identification as asexual. By comparing differences within subpopulations, the results of this study extend upon our understanding of the various sub-identities that exist within the asexual population and attend to different experiences within the asexual community. This in turn contributes towards our understanding of how asexual people experience interpersonal relationships, their interactions with others, and how they develop a positive sense of identity.

Keywords: *Asexuality, Identity Development Milestones, Gender, Romantic Orientation*

Introduction

Asexuality is typically defined as a unique sexual orientation (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) or sexual identity (Brotto et al., 2010; Greaves et al., 2017; Scherrer, 2008), in which an individual lacks sexual attraction towards others (Catri, 2021; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and self-identifies as asexual (Brotto et al., 2010; Greaves et al., 2017). The asexual community is considered particularly heterogenous (Hammack et al., 2019), with the presence of varying gender identities (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b) and distinctions between romantic and sexual attraction (Kelleher et al., 2023). Specifically, individuals who identify along the “asexual spectrum” report varying experiences of attraction and behavior, with many considering sexual and romantic identity as two separate forms of orientation (Kelleher et al., 2023). This spectrum includes distinctions between individuals who rarely experience sexual attraction (e.g., gray asexual) and those who experience sexual attraction after an intimate bond is formed (e.g., demisexual) (Hille et al., 2020). Moreover, growing documentation of heterogeneity within the broader asexual community, has shed light on the unique mechanisms of romantic attraction that exist within this population, with some asexual individuals experiencing romantic attraction (e.g., heteroromantic) and others not (e.g., aromantic) (Antonsen et al., 2020; Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022).

Sexual Identity Milestones

Sexual identity milestones are used to identify life events surrounding an individual's recognition of their sexual attractions (Parks & Hughes, 2007; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and pertains to first sexual experiences or “pivotal events in the exploration, formation, and integration of their sexual identities” (Bishop et al., 2020, p. 2178; Martos et al., 2015). Within LGBTQ+ populations, this includes age of first sexual attraction to a same-sex

person, disclosure, and self-identification as a sexual minority (Bishop et al., 2020; Martos et al., 2015). Research indicates that there are distinct sexual identity milestones, with much of the literature focusing on the average age at which an individual completes each stage of their sexual identity development. Moreover, pacing and time between these milestones are used to measure successful identity development and allow for a better understanding of the factors that contribute towards sexual identity trajectories (Martos et al., 2015). By focusing on diversity and distinct interpersonal factors that exist within LGBTQ+ communities, researchers have identified variability in timing and space between identity milestones (Bishop et al., 2020; Grov et al., 2018; Martos et al., 2015). Furthermore, examining identity-based prejudices (e.g., gender and sexuality) that correspond with interconnected social identities, have allowed researchers to better understand features of oppression and marginalization witnessed among sexual minority populations (Bishop et al., 2020; Crenshaw, 1991).

There is increasing interest in the interpersonal factors that shape the development of an individual's sexual identity (D'Augelli, 1994; Diamond, 2006), including, age, gender, and romantic orientation (Glover et al., 2009; Savin-Williams, 2011). This is seen within research whereby the intersection of an individual's gender (i.e., man, woman, non-binary) and sexuality (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual), has been shown to contribute towards the timing and pacing of their sexual identity development (Bishop et al., 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Maguen et al., 2002; Martos et al., 2015). For example, although self-identified men often experience same-sex attraction and self-realization milestones earlier than self-identified women, they often take longer to disclose their sexual identities (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Martos et al., 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). This may be as a result of women experiencing less stigmatization and greater social acceptance towards their sexual minority identities (D'Augelli et al., 2008), with more positive attitudes and less implicit biases held

towards lesbian women than gay men (Breen & Karpinski, 2013; Kite & Whitley, 1996). Moreover, although bisexual people typically report later ages of first same-sex attraction and self-identification, the time between their same-sex attraction, and disclosure is often shorter than gay men and lesbian women (Maguen et al., 2002; Martos et al., 2015). Again, this pacing between milestones may be understood through initial delays in opposite-sex attraction and later identity exploration with less fear of rejection (Maguen et al., 2002; Martos et al., 2015).

Age is also found to be correlated with sexual identity milestones among LGBTQ+ individuals, with younger cohorts reporting significantly younger ages of first disclosure and self-identification (Grov et al., 2018; Martos et al., 2015; Parks & Hughes, 2007). This condensed timing between milestones may be interpreted through increased visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people (Bishop et al., 2020; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Variability in Asexual Identity Milestones: Gender, Age, and Romantic Identity

Due to the varying sub-identities that exist within the asexual community, research suggests that the development of an asexual identity is a “fluid process” that is not experienced in the same way among asexual individuals (Kelleher et al., 2023, p. 61; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016). Specifically, the interconnection of socially constructed identities such as sexuality and gender have been shown to shape the identity development trajectories of asexual people (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b) and create an array of experiences within the asexual community (Chan & Leung, 2023; Guz et al., 2022; Hille, 2023). This is seen within research whereby gender non-binary asexual individuals reach identity milestone (e.g., disclosure) sooner than their male and female counterparts due to a lack of restriction surrounding gender-based sexual norms

(Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). Moreover, the intersection between asexuality, age, and, romantic identity has been shown to contribute towards differing experiences of disclosure and interpersonal interactions for asexual people (Cuthbert, 2019; Kelleher et al., 2023), with younger cohorts experiencing milestones at an earlier age, and romantic identified asexual individuals placing greater emphasis on the need to come out (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b).

Evidence suggests that gender plays a significant role within asexual individuals' experiences (Guz et al., 2022), as well as other peoples' reactions towards the disclosure of their asexual identities (Kelleher et al., 2023). Allonormative assumptions and heteronormative ideals surrounding sex and sexuality, have contributed towards the denial of asexual individual's identities (Chasin, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a), with asexual men and women experiencing epistemic injustices that are unique to their gender (Cuthbert, 2019; 2022). Specifically, social constructions of womanhood and femineity as passive and lacking agency, as well as masculinity necessitating sexual desire, has contributed towards gendered experiences of relationships and dating among asexual individuals (Cuthbert, 2019; Vares, 2019).

Research indicates that many asexual women scheduled their lack of sexual attraction and identify as asexual earlier than asexual men (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). This may be due to greater levels of disbelief surrounding the disclosure of male asexual identities, as well as an assumption of inherent male sexual drive and masculinity (Kelleher et al., 2023). Asexual men and those who are perceived socially as male, describe a sense of apprehension and misunderstanding when attempting to disclose their asexuality, with other people attributing their lack of sexual attraction to a "phase" (Cuthbert, 2022; Vares, 2018). Moreover, some report that their asexuality is assumed to be an attempt to conceal sexual deviance or repressed sexuality, and attribute these injustices to the construction of gender (Cuthbert, 2022; Przybylo, 2013). On the other hand, asexual women describe the dismissal

of their asexuality due to the concept of “female sexual passivity” as well as a lack of agency surrounding their sexual orientation (Cuthbert, 2022; Gupta, 2019; Haefner, 2011; Vares, 2018, p. 526). This is seen within research whereby asexual women report greater difficulty owning their sexual autonomy due to heteronormative expectations and the sexual coercion of women (Gupta, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018; Yang, 2021). Equally, assumptions surrounding marriage and reproduction (Foster et al., 2019) as well as pressure to comply with traditional family structures, has resulted in the denial of asexual women’s identities (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b), with many told that they hadn’t “found the right man yet” (Vares, 2018). This is also seen within the accounts of some non-binary or gender-neutral asexual individuals, with other people mistaking their lack of sexual attraction as waiting for love or the right romantic partner (Vares, 2018). These accusations of frigidity and “leading on” partners are found to be largely absent in the accounts of male asexual individuals (Cuthbert, 2022).

Romantic identity may intersect with asexual identities, contributing towards variability within asexual individuals’ experiences, and critically shaping their interpersonal relationships (Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). Research indicates that romantic identity is associated with perspectives on sexuality among asexual people, as well as their past and current experiences with sexual behavior (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). These motivations regarding sexual activity and romantic relationships have an important role in self-identification within the asexual spectrum, with evidence to indicate that aromantic asexual individuals identify more with asexuality (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). Equally, some romantic asexual individuals may self-identify more closely with communities (i.e., LGBTQ+) that correspond with their romantic identity and thus, feel less need to align themselves with the asexual community (Bell, 2015; Colborne, 2018; Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). The presence of a romantic or aromantic identity has also been shown to influence

asexual individuals' willingness to disclose their asexuality, as well as the nature of their desired relationships, and how they interact with others (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a). For example, while romantic asexual individuals may disclose their asexuality to avoid confusion and establish their lack of sexual attraction, aromantic asexual individuals do not seem to place the same level of emphasis on the need to disclose their orientation (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a). These discrepancies in asexual individuals' willingness to disclose their identity may also be attributed to romantic asexual individuals' desire to engage in romantic relationships and aromantic asexual individuals' preference for purely platonic or queer-platonic relationships (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). Finally, societal expectations surrounding the need to engage in romantic relationships can add to the challenges faced by aromantic asexual individuals who choose not to participate in relationships or prefer committed aromantic partnerships (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022).

Age is also shown to be an important intersecting factor within asexual identities (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b; Xu et al., 2023), with evidence to indicate that asexual individuals are becoming aware of their lack of sexual attraction and searching for their sexual identity at increasingly young ages (McInroy et al., 2022). This may be attributed to the growing awareness of asexuality and asexual communities (i.e., AVEN), as well as more positive representations of asexual people within mainstream media (Brandley, 2023; Reed, 2023). Evidence indicates that younger cohorts of asexual people experience less oppression and identify with their asexuality earlier than older groups (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a, 2024b). Again, this may be due to increased access to information and support throughout the asexual community, as well as growing visibility of the orientation (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a). On the other hand, a lack of awareness of asexuality among older cohorts as well as the relatively invisible nature of the orientation outside of online platforms may act as a factor in the timing of identification and disclosure among asexual individuals (Kelleher et

al., 2023; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Vares, 2021). The fixed-nature of age-related expectations may cause some younger and middle-aged asexual individuals to feel that they are missing out on major relationship markers (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). For example, asexuality may be perceived as incompatible with successive age-related identifications and may subsequently isolate younger or middle-aged asexual individuals from dating, having a long-term partner and engaging in traditional family structures (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). Moreover, as asexual individuals typically begin to realize their lack of sexual attraction and explore their sexual identity during adolescence or early adulthood (Ginoza et al., 2014), this period may leave them particularly susceptible to psychological distress (e.g., associated with having a stigmatized asexual identity) and external social discrimination (e.g., the negative responses of others to one's asexuality) (McInroy et al., 2020; Winer et al., 2022; Xu & Rahman, 2023).

Although several studies have investigated identity development milestones within LGBTQ+ populations (e.g., Bishop et al., 2020; Calso et al., 2011; Martos et al., 2015), there is currently none surrounding the order and pacing of asexual identity development. As a result, this research will examine variability within asexual identity development milestones, with a focus on the diversity present in the asexual population. This will directly address the need to examine the intersection of various sub-identities within the asexual population (Chan & Leung, 2023; Hille, 2023), and aligns with recommendations to attend to different experiences within the asexual community (Copulsky et al., 2023). Moreover, this will contribute towards our understanding of how asexual people experience inter-personal relationships, their interactions with others, and how they develop a positive sense of identity.

The Current Study

In the current study, we explore sexual identity milestones in a sample of participants who identify as belonging along the asexual spectrum. Specifically, we assess differences in sexual identity milestones across gender, romantic orientation, and, age cohort. The asexual identity milestones included in this study were derived from literature surrounding the key events and processes that lead to the development of an asexual identity (e.g., Kelleher et al., 2023; Robbins et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008). This includes the ages at which an individual first becomes aware of their lack of sexual attraction; searches for an explanation; identifies as asexual; and discloses their asexual identity. Given the dearth of quantitative research investigating asexual identity milestone timing and pacing, the current study is inductive in nature and largely exploratory. Some tentative hypotheses did, however, inform our analyses, including:

1. Subgroups defined by gender will vary in milestone timing and pacing, with discrepancies according to identification as man, woman and, gender non-binary.
2. Subgroups defined by romantic identity will vary in milestone timing and pacing, with discrepancies according to identification as romantic or aromantic.
3. Older cohorts will experience asexual identity milestones at a later age and have a longer time between milestones than younger cohorts.

Method

Participants

Inclusion criteria ascertained that all participants were over eighteen years of age and identified as asexual. Specific gender or romantic identity were not considered criteria for exclusion. Information surrounding natal sex was not collected. Participants also reported the age in years at which they achieved key asexual identity-related milestones. Three-hundred and thirty-nine participants responded to the survey. Following the removal of incomplete or

missing responses, 317 participants between the ages of 18 and 58 were included in the data analysis ($M = 28.04$, $SD = 8.52$). Descriptive values are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

The survey was distributed via Qualtrics software (Software Version 2018) to the online platform the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and reddit (r/asexuality). Data were collected from May to August, 2023. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM's Statistical Software Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.0 and AMOS, version 26.0. Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board (insert name here), (protocol number: 712202002) and permission to conduct this research was received from the AVEN Project Team. Participants did not receive compensation for taking part in the survey.

Measures

Gender Identity

For gender identity, participants were asked, "with which gender do you most identify?". They were given the following list of self-identifications and asked to choose the one that fits best: 1 = "man", 2 = "woman", 3 = "trans woman", 4 = "trans man", 5 = "non-binary/third gender", and 6 = "self-describe" (with a write-in option).

Based on their self-identifications, three categories were assigned to the answers: 1 = man, 2 = woman, and 3 = non-binary/trans. Respondents who indicated both binary and non-binary trans identities (e.g., "man" and "trans woman") were assigned to the non-binary/trans group. The open answers of the participants who indicated having an "other" gender identity were screened by the first author and then assigned to one of the three groups (e.g., answers such as "agender" assigned as non-binary). For the purpose of analysis, trans and non-binary groups were combined in other to compare them to the binary groups (i.e., man and woman).

Romantic Identity

For romantic identity, participants were asked “with which romantic identity do you most identify?”. They were given the following list of self-identifications and asked to choose the one that fits best: 1 = heteroromantic, 2 = homoromantic, 3 = biromantic, 4 = panromantic, 5 = demiromantic, 6 = aromantic, 7 = gray-romantic, and 8 = “self-describe” (with a write-in option). Based on their self-identifications, two categories were assigned to the answers: 1 = romantic (e.g., “homoromantic” or “heteroromantic”), and 2 = aromantic. The open answers of the participants who indicated having an “other” romantic identity were again screened by the first author and assigned to the categories of “aromantic” or “romantic”. For the purpose of analysis, two romantic identity groups were created: “romantic” and “aromantic”.

Age

Participants self-reported their age in years and were subsequently classified into three distinct age cohorts: “18-29 years of age” = 1, “30-44 years of age” = 2, and, “45 years of age and over” = 3. These age categories were selected in line with categories identified in previous studies examining identity milestones of LGBTQ+ individuals (i.e., Martos et al., 2015) and align with sociologically relevant birth generations for gay, lesbian, and, bisexual people (Cook-Daniels, 2008).

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables utilized in this study fell under two categories: asexual identity milestones and time between milestones. The asexual identity milestones measure was drawn from research surrounding key events and processes that lead to the development of an asexual identity (e.g., Robbins et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008; Kelleher et al., 2023). (studies investigating asexual identity), while also taking inspiration from previous studies that examined sexual identity milestones among LBG people (i.e., Martos et al., 2015; Bishop

et al., 2020). The time between milestones variable was created post data collection. Both variables are described in more detail below.

Asexual Identity Milestones

Participants were asked to report the age in years that they first experienced each of the following asexual identity milestones: age of first awareness of a lack of sexual attraction (“At approximately what age did you first become aware of your lack of sexual attraction?”), age of first searching for orientation (“At approximately what age did you first start searching for an explanation for your lack of sexual attraction?”), age of first discovery of the term asexuality (“At approximately what age did you first become aware of the term asexuality?”), age of first self-identification (“At approximately what age did you first identify as asexual?”), and age of first disclosure (At approximately what age did you first tell someone about your lack of sexual attraction/asexual identity”). Participants who answered “don’t know” or chose not to answer were coded as missing. To distinguish the age of first awareness of a lack of sexual attraction (i.e., “age of first awareness”) from participants’ age of when they first realized their identity as an asexual person, the latter milestone will be referred to as “age of first self-identification”.

Time Between Milestones

The time between variables were developed for asexual identity milestones that were expected to follow a linear chronological order. This order was conceived according to asexual identity development trajectories that are outlined within literature. Negative values were included for those who did not follow a chronological order to avoid overrepresenting sample means. This included the time or “pacing” between:

1. Becoming aware of a lack of sexual attraction and searching for a sexual identity.
2. Searching for a sexual identity and discovering the term asexuality.

3. Discovering the term asexuality and self-identifying as asexual.
4. Identifying as asexual and disclosing one's asexuality.

Statistical Analysis

Nonparametric tests were used because of large differences in subgroup sizes as well as the presence of heteroskedasticity (Ostertagova et al., 2014). Kruskal–Wallis tests were performed to compare the timing (i.e., age) and pacing (i.e., difference in timing between milestones) of when participants first experienced sexual identity milestones according to their age cohort and gender identity. Mann–Whitney tests were carried out to compare the timing and pacing of sexual identity milestones according to romantic identity. A significance level of .05 was utilized, with analyses conducted separately for each milestone (e.g., age of first becoming aware of a lack of sexual attraction) and independent variable (e.g., gender). Post-hoc comparisons using Dunn's method with a Bonferroni correction for multiple tests were also performed to assess the mean rank scores and variance estimates within groups.

Results

Kruskal-Wallis Tests and Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to determine whether there were significant differences in timing of sexual identity milestones across age, gender, and, romantic identity. See Table 2 for a summary of differences in sexual identity milestones according to age and gender and Table 3 for differences according to romantic identity.

Sexual Identity Milestones: First Awareness

There was a significant difference in timing of first becoming aware of a lack of sexual attraction across age groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 317) = 37.73, p < 0.001$, with post-hoc comparisons indicating that the median age of participants in the youngest group was

significantly lower than that of the middle ($p < .001$), and older ($p < .001$) group. There was also a significant difference across the three gender groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 10.22, p = 0.006$, with median ages of gender non-binary participants being significantly lower than that of woman ($p = .004$) and man ($p = .015$) participants. However, there were no significant differences between the median ages of participants in the middle and older age group ($p = 1.00$), or between those in woman and man categories ($p = 1.00$). Findings indicated that there was also no significant difference in the timing at which individuals first become aware of their lack of sexual attraction between romantic and aromantic groups, $z = -1.25, p = 0.21$.

Sexual Identity Milestones: First Searching

There was a significant difference in timing of first searching for sexual identity across age groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 113.23, p < 0.001$, with post-hoc comparisons indicating that the median age of participants in the youngest group was significantly lower than that of the middle ($p < .001$) and older ($p < .001$) group. There was also a significant difference across gender groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 8.87, p = 0.012$, with median ages of gender non-binary participants being significantly lower than that of woman ($p = .004$) and man ($p = .015$). However, there was no significant difference between the median ages of participants in the middle and older age group ($p = 0.15$), or between those in woman and man categories ($p = 1.00$) and non-binary and man categories ($p = .142$). Findings indicated that there was also no significant difference between romantic and aromantic groups, $z = -0.23, p = 0.82$.

Sexual Identity Milestones: First Discovering the Term

There was a significant difference in age of first becoming aware of the term asexuality across age groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 139.83, p < 0.001$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the median ages of participants in the youngest ($p < .001$), middle ($p < .001$), and older ($p = .005$) age group all differed significantly. There was also a significant

difference across gender groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 15.59, p < 0.001$, with the median age of gender non-binary participants being significantly lower than that of woman ($p < .001$) and man ($p = .002$) participants. However, there was no significant difference in milestone timing among participants in the woman and man group ($p = 0.448$), and romantic and aromantic group ($z = -0.56, p = 0.57$).

Sexual Identity Milestones: First Identification

There was a significant difference in age of first identifying as asexual across age groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 146.84, p < 0.001$, with post-hoc comparisons indicated that the median ages of participants in the youngest ($p < .001$), middle ($p < .001$), and older ($p = .007$) age group all differed significantly. There was also a significant difference across gender groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 16.32, p < 0.001$, with the median age of gender non-binary participants being significantly lower than that of woman ($p < .001$) and man ($p = .005$) participants. However, there was no significant difference between the median ages of participants in the woman and man groups ($p = 0.806$), and romantic and aromantic groups ($z = -0.83, p = 0.403$).

Sexual Identity Milestones: First Disclosure

There was a significant difference in first disclosing an asexual identity across the three age groups, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 128.04, p < 0.001$, with post-hoc comparisons indicated that the median ages of participants in the youngest ($p < .001$), middle ($p < .001$), and older ($p = .019$) age group all significantly differed. There was also a significant difference across gender, $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 16.95, p < 0.001$, with the median ages of gender non-binary participants being significantly lower than that of woman ($p < .001$) and man ($p = .009$) participants. However, there was no significant difference between the median ages of

woman and man participants ($p = 0.96$) and between those in the romantic and aromantic groups ($z = -0.24$, $p = 0.807$).

Time Between Milestones

Individual Kruskal-Wallis Tests and Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to evaluate whether the time between achieving sexual identity milestones differed according to age, gender, and romantic identity. See Table 4 and Table 5 for a summary of the differences in time between milestones.

There was a significant difference in the time between becoming aware of a lack of sexual attraction and searching for sexual identity across age groups $\chi^2 (2, N = 317) = 16.14$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the median difference in pacing among participants in the younger age group was significantly less than that of the middle ($p < .001$) and older ($p = .05$) age group. Findings also indicated that there was a significant difference in the time between identifying as asexual and disclosing an asexual identity across romantic and aromantic participants, with the median difference in pacing among participants in the romantic group being significantly less than participants in the aromantic group ($z = -2.11$, $p = 0.035$). No other statistically significant differences in the time between sexual identity milestones according to groups were found in the analyses.

Discussion

Consistent with the first hypothesis, milestone timing differed according to gender, with man and woman participants experiencing identity development milestones at a later age than gender non-binary participants. Earlier stages of asexual identity development for gender non-binary people may be understood through a lack of restriction surrounding gendered sexual norms and the opportunity to better explore and identify with various sexual identities (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). This corresponds with intersectional studies surrounding

cisgender and gender non-binary people, whereby higher levels of sexual identity acceptance and affirmation is found within non-binary cohorts (Scandurra et al., 2023). Moreover, less normative aspects of non-binary peoples' gender roles have been shown to contribute towards greater opportunities to disclose their identities, as well as negotiate experiences surrounding their sexuality (Scandurra et al., 2023). Moreover, the more prolonged process for man and woman participants may also be understood through assumptions of inherent male sexual drive and conflicts surrounding masculinity (Gupta, 2019; Kelleher et al., 2023; Vares, 2018), as well as pressure to comply with traditional family structures and the denial of female asexual individuals' identities (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). These findings offer insight into the unique experiences of gender non-binary asexual individuals, and contributes towards our understanding of the intersection between asexuality and gender. More specifically, this brings us to consider what effect, if any, do gender norms have on the identity development trajectories of asexual individuals and whether gender non-binary individuals' distance from gender norms allow them more freedom to explore their sexual identities. Moreover, these findings confirm diversity of gender norms within asexual communities and contributes towards a better understanding of underrepresented groups within research on asexuality.

A further contribution of this study is that there were no notable discrepancies found in the timing of man and woman asexual identity development milestones. While this differs from research on the varying experiences of man and woman asexual individuals' disclosure (Cuthbert, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Winer et al., 2022), this is consistent with literature surrounding asexual identification as a relatively common experience that is not dependent upon a specific gender role (Mollet & Lackman, 2021; Kelleher et al., 2023). Finally, participants did not accelerate through milestones more quickly across genders. This corresponds with research on other sexual minority cohorts (e.g., Bishop et al., 2020) and again aligns with allonormativity and gendered sexual norms (Chan & Leung, 2023; Kelleher

& Murphy, 2024b). This congruency surrounding participants' identity development sheds further light on the role of allonormativity and assumptions surrounding sex and sexuality within the lives of asexual individuals, and highlights similarities among them.

Findings support our second hypothesis that asexual identity milestones occurred at an earlier age for participants in the younger cohort and partially supported our hypothesis that younger cohorts had a shorter time between milestones. Asexual participants in the youngest cohort became aware of their lack of sexual attraction at a significantly younger age than middle and older cohorts. This is consistent with research surrounding asexual identity development trajectories and the role that the internet and online asexual communities now play in the discovery of an asexual identity (Kelleher et al., 2023). There were significant differences in disclosure and identification as asexual, with younger cohorts disclosing their lack of sexual attraction much earlier than middle and older cohorts. These findings may be interpreted through a shift in societal views of asexuality (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a, 2024b) and other LGBTQ+ identities (Grov et al., 2018; Martos et al., 2015; Parks & Hughes, 2007), as well as increased visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people (Bishop et al., 2020; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Morgan, 2013; Russell & Fish, 2016; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Moreover, this aligns with previous research surrounding the identity development trajectories of asexual individuals and discrepancies that exist according to age (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024b). These findings help to illuminate differences within the asexual community according to age cohorts and better reflects the complexities of asexual identity development. From an intersectional perspective, this grants a broader understanding of developmental trajectories and how age may shape the way in which asexual individuals progress through identity milestones.

In addition to experiencing sexual identity milestones earlier, participants in the younger cohort took considerably less time between becoming aware of their lack of sexual attraction and searching for an explanation. This aligns with research surrounding an increasing acceptance of diverse sexual orientations among contemporary cohorts and accelerated identity development processes (Bishop et al., 2020; Hammack et al., 2018). Interestingly, however, there were no significant differences in milestones pacing for discovery of the term asexuality and identification as asexual, or identification as asexual and disclosure. This may be interpreted through research which indicates that individuals typically embrace their asexuality upon discovering its existence (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and shortly thereafter identify as asexual (Andersson, 2010; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021). Moreover, no significant difference in time between identification as asexual and disclosure may be understood through increased understanding and awareness of asexuality from others, as well as availability of social support (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rothblum et al., 2020). These findings help to better frame asexual identity development within broader societal change and emphasize the role of online communities in shaping asexual individuals' identities.

Findings did not support our hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in milestone timing among romantic and aromantic participants. This again corresponds with allonormative assumptions surrounding sexuality (Mollet & Lackman, 2021) and congruency in asexual individuals' accounts of their identity development (Kelleher & Murphy, 2024a). There was, however, a significant difference in the time between identification as asexual and disclosing an asexual identity among romantic and aromantic cohorts. This is consistent with romantic asexual individuals' desire to establish intimate relationships and disclose their asexuality to potential partners (Kelleher & Murphy 2024b), as well as aromantic individuals'

perceived lack of utility towards coming out to others (Robbins et al., 2016; Vares, 2018). This highlights that asexual individuals' experiences may be stratified according to their romantic identities, and reaffirms the need to take an intersectional approach to the study of asexuality.

The findings detailed in this article have several policy and practice implications. Clinicians and researchers should take into consideration how asexual identity milestones, including experiences of disclosure and interpersonal interactions with others, may influence mental health outcomes and identity development processes across different subgroups. For example, variations in milestone timing among asexual individuals may be linked to differences in gender identities (Cuthbert, 2019; Vares, 2018), as man and woman participants reach milestones later than non-binary cohorts. Moreover, these gendered experiences that some asexual individuals face, may contribute towards further variability within their experiences and critically shape their interpersonal relationships with others, including dismissal, denial, and a lack of acceptance (Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). This in turn may hinder the development of a positive sense of identity across different subgroups and lead to anxiety, insecurity, and poorer mental health that is specific to an asexual individual's gender (Liang & Chen, 2024). When attending to different age groups, discrepancies in birth cohorts may also contribute towards differing experiences of disclosure and interpersonal interactions for asexual people (Cuthbert, 2019; Kelleher et al., 2023). Like research on other non-heterosexual cohorts (e.g., Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Rosario et al., 2011, 2006), achieving milestones at a slower pace or experiencing significant gaps in the time spent between milestones, may contribute towards variability in mental health and help-seeking behaviours according to age groups. Given these discrepancies across age and gender, clinicians should be encouraged to consider how these intersecting factors may interact with asexual individuals' identities and integrate this within the provision of services.

This includes the design and implementation of more effective interventions that are targeted towards subgroups most at risk of mental health issues and attending to unique experiences of stigmatization and marginalization (Chan & Leung, 2023; McInory et al., 2020).

Furthermore, findings may also inform future investigations surrounding the association between milestone timing and factors affecting the health patterns of asexual individuals.

This knowledge may be considered essential for customizing strategies to minimize disparities in mental health and overall wellbeing within the asexual population.

Study Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are several limitations present in this study that require consideration. As the majority of participants were white and hailed from Western societies (i.e., United States of America and United Kingdom), this limits the generalizability of findings to asexual cohorts outside of these group. Moreover, as data were gathered through AVEN and reddit, this excludes asexual participants who do not have access to online forums. Thus, future research should examine asexual identity development milestones and pacing with participants not recruited through asexuality-specific websites. This may grant further insight into the processes that underlie asexual identity development trajectories when individuals are not predisposed to asexual communities and online sources of information. Although this study sought to examine the variability that exists within the asexual community, several subgroups were clustered under umbrella categories for the purpose of analysis. This limited our ability to examine nuances within subgroups (i.e., romantic categories such as heteroromantic, biromantic, and, gray-romantic) as well as how this fluidity may influence asexual identity development. Finally, as findings indicate that asexual individuals are experiencing sexual identity milestones at increasingly younger ages, future research examine the identity

trajectories of asexual youths, as well as consider how identifying and coming out as asexual differs during adolescence versus early, middle, and late adulthood.

Conclusion

The present study examined variability in timing and pacing of asexual identity development milestones, with a focus on the diversity present within the asexual population. Findings show that participants from the younger cohort report earlier and more accelerated pacing of milestones relative to those from the middle and older cohorts. Subgroups defined by gender also varied in milestone timing, with men and women participants experiencing asexual identity development milestones at a later age than gender non-binary participants. No significant differences in milestone timing were found across romantic orientations, apart from the time between identification as asexual and disclosure. This study contributes valuable insights into the various sub-identities that exist within the asexual population and provides several recommendations on the design and implementation of more effective interventions targeted towards asexual subgroups.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Sinéad Kelleher. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Sinéad Kelleher and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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