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Examining the Personal and Societal Factors that Inform the Development of an Asexual Identity: A Qualitative and Quantitative Enquiry

Thesis presented by

Sinéad Kelleher

[0000-0001-8652-6238]

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork

School of Applied Psychology

Head of School: Prof. Carol Linehan

Supervisors: Dr Mike Murphy and Dr Raegan Murphy

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List of Key Terminology

Asexual: An individual who does not experience sexual attraction.

Ace: Abbreviation for ‘asexual’.

Aromantic: An individual who does not experience romantic attraction.

Aro: Abbreviation for ‘aromantic’.

Demisexual: An individual who experiences sexual attraction once a strong emotional and/or romantic connection has been formed with another person.

Demiromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction once a strong emotional connection has been formed with another person.

Demi: Abbreviation for ‘demisexual’ and/or ‘demiromantic’.

Gray-asexual: An individual who sometimes/occasionally experiences sexual attraction.

Gray-romantic: An individual who sometimes/occasionally experiences romantic attraction.

Autochorissexual/Aegosexual: An individual who is aroused by sex that does not involve themselves.

Aegoromantic: An individual who has romantic fantasies and/or engages with romantic media but feels little/no romantic attraction in real life and does not desire a romantic relationship.

Aceflux: An individuals whose sexual orientation fluctuates but typically stays on the asexual spectrum.

Quoisexual: An individual who is unsure of whether they experience sexual attraction and/or unsure of what sexual attraction is.

Quoiromantic: An individual who is unsure of whether they experience romantic attraction and/or unsure of what romantic attraction is.

Heteroromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction to the opposite sex/gender.

Homoromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction to the same sex/gender.

Biromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction to the opposite and same sex/gender.

Panromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction to other people regardless of their sex/gender.

Alloromantic: An individual who experiences romantic attraction.

Allosexual: An individual who experiences sexual attraction.

Male:

Queer-platonic Relationship (QPR): A platonic relationship that transcends usual boundaries for relationships. A very strong non-romantic relationship.

Asexual Erasure: The denial or denigration of asexuality. Lack of representation and/or invisibility of asexuality within society.

Compulsory Sexuality: The belief that all people experience sexual attraction.

Heteronormativity: The belief that heterosexuality is the default societal configuration/norm.

Allonormativity: The belief that all people experience sexual attraction.

Publications from this Thesis

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Kelleher, S., Murphy, M., & Su, X. (2022). Asexual identity development and internalisation: A scoping review of quantitative and qualitative evidence. *Psychology & Sexuality*. *14*(1), 45-72. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2022.2057867

Kelleher, S., & Murphy, M. (2022). The identity development and internalization of asexual orientation in women: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2022.2031960

Kelleher, S., & Murphy, M. (2022). Asexual identity development and internalisation: A thematic analysis. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2022.2091127

Kelleher, S. (2022). "And then things clicked" – Developing a measure of asexual identity development. *The Boolean: Snapshots of Doctoral Research as University College Cork*, *6*(1), 127-132. https://doi.org/10.33178/boolean.2022.1

Kelleher, S., Murphy, M., & Murphy, R. (2023). Measuring Features of Asexual Identity Development: The Development and Validation of a Psychometric Scale. *The Journal of Sex Research* (Under Review)

Declaration of Academic Honesty

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

Sinéad Kelleher,

School of Applied Psychology,

University College Cork,

March 2023

Contribution of First Author

The aforementioned peer-reviewed journal articles are incorporated as chapters within this thesis. As first author, I performed the data collection for each study, led data analysis and interpretation of findings, as well as the write-up and publication process. Co-authors made the following contributions:

As my primary PhD supervisor, Dr Mike Murphy helped shape the research design and structure of the overall thesis and provided critical feedback for each paper.

As my secondary PhD supervisor, Dr Raegan Murphy was involved in the conception and development of the psychometric measure.

Xin Su assisted in database searches and selection of papers to be included in the scoping review.

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Abstract

As the prevalence of those expressing a lack of sexual attraction continues to rise, so too does the need for research to fully uncover the nature of asexuality and the experiences of asexual people. The asexual community, allies and researchers alike, are becoming increasingly concerned with discovering the processes that surround asexual identity development and in doing so, gain a more nuanced understanding of the diverse nature of the orientation. Moreover, while distinctions within the asexual community are becoming increasingly recognised and understood, there remains little empirical evidence in understanding how experiences differ across the asexual spectrum, as well as the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities. Through a series of publications, this thesis examines unique features of asexual identities within the context of both a heteronormative and allonormative society.

Study one (chapter three) presents a scoping review of literature and synthesisation of all available evidence in the area of asexual identity development, and highlights gaps present within research. This review outlines how both heteronormative and allonormative beliefs cause many individuals to adopt negative attitudes towards their asexuality and hinders the development of a positive self-concept. Moreover, findings of this study inform the design and protocol for research presented in chapters five, seven and nine, and confirms the absence of a psychometric scale measuring dimensions of asexual identity development. Informed by the findings of the scoping review, study two (chapter five) presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the accounts of five self-identified asexual women. Findings from this study highlight the role of romantic orientation

within asexual identity development and inspire the next step in this research to compare the experiences of romantic and aromantic asexual people. Through a thematic analysis of the accounts of 99 asexual people, study three (chapter seven) demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and romantic orientation within asexual identity development. By focusing on the diverse nature of the asexual community, this research provides a more comprehensive insight into the complexity of this experience and contributes towards the development of a more robust and psychometrically sound measure. The final study (chapter nine) cumulates in the development and evaluation of the 37-item Assessment of Asexual Identity Development Scale (AAID). As the first psychometric measure of its kind, the AAID measures variables unique to asexuality and accurately assesses dimensions of the lives of asexual people.

This thesis acts as a significant contribution to our understanding of the key concepts and experiences that underly the development of an asexual identity. Findings correspond with current theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, and experiences of minority stress that arise from both a heteronormative and allonormative society. Moreover, this thesis provides an account of the varying developmental trajectories witnessed among people of an asexual identity and presents a more inclusive insight into the experience of being asexual. This research also contributes towards a growing recognition of the variability that exists within the asexual community and elicits the voices of a range of asexual individuals.

Chapter 1 General Introduction

Asexuality is best defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards other people that is not explained by a physical or psychological disorder and is recognised as a minority sexual orientation (Brotto & Yule, 2017). Visibility of asexuality has increased considerably over the past twenty years with the emergence of asexual specific-platforms such as the Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN), founded in 2001. Since then, the online asexual community has expanded with the presence of several online forums, YouTube videos and educational resources dedicated to raising awareness of asexuality. These hubs of community have allowed asexual individuals to gain a more complex understanding of their sexuality and has granted them the opportunity to engage and connect with one another (Brown et al., 2022; Carrigan, 2011; Catri, 2021; Hinderliter, 2013). This movement follows a growing openness towards diverse sexual identities and the acknowledgement of asexuality as a social identity (Brotto & Milani, 2022; Guz et al., 2022).

AVEN has expanded considerably over the past several decades and currently holds over 120,000 registered members around the world (Brotto & Milani, 2022). This expansion of the asexual community has been followed closely by a growth in academic attention (Bogaert, 2004; Przybylo, 2013) and interest in understanding asexuality as a unique sexual identity (Catri, 2021; Guz et al., 2022). Moreover, this increase in research and visibility of asexual communities has propelled the movement away from pathological to the more affirming perspectives surrounding the diversity of human sexuality (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). However, there remains some conjecture within the literature surrounding the prevalence of asexuality, with difficulties in establishing this figure attributed to

varying definitions, as well as inappropriate sampling and recruitment procedures (Brotto & Milani, 2022). For example, while Bogaert (2004) initially reported a 1.05% prevalence rate of asexuality, this differed significantly in follow-up studies that reported .5% (Bogaert, 2012). Similarly, while Lucassen et al. (2011) reported that 1.8% of people lack sexual attraction, Höglund et al. (2014), found that 3.3% of women and 1.5% of men had not experienced sexual attraction in the past year. As these discrepancies may be attributed to limited age-range and time-span of attraction, a prevalence rate of approximately 1 - 2% is considered the most appropriate estimate of the asexual population (Bogaert, 2004; Poston & Baumle, 2010; Rothblum et al., 2020).

1.1 Conceptualising Asexuality

The concept of asexuality was first introduced in Kinsey and colleagues' one-dimensional model of sexual orientation. Within this model, Kinsey (1948) recognised the presence of non-sexual (asexual) individuals with limited socio-sexual contacts or interactions. This research was the first to place sexual attraction along a continuum and in doing so, acknowledged the diversity of sexual orientation (Brown et al., 2022). This understanding of sexual attraction as existing along a continuum was later expanded upon in Storms' (1980) two-dimensional model of erotic orientation. Within this model, Storms (1980) proposed that individuals may score low on both same-sex (homoeroticism) and opposite-sex (heteroeroticism) attraction and were assumed to lack sexual orientation. Together, these models highlighted the concept of sexual orientation as a complex phenomenon and provided the foundation to inform our current understanding of asexuality.

The emergence of asexual communities and an increase in sociological and psychological research has changed our understanding of asexuality and how we conceptualise the orientation. Although asexuality is most popularly described as both a lack of sexual attraction and self-identification (Bogaert, 2004, 2006; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2017; Catri, 2021; Hinderliter, 2009; Prause & Graham, 2007), there remains little academic consensus on how we define asexuality (Catri, 2021). When beginning my PhD studies, I was brought to consider how I would define asexuality within my research and criteria to identify participants as asexual. This first step involved determining what asexuality is not and distinguishing the orientation from sexual pathology or paraphilia. In doing this, I found that both researchers and the asexual community agree that asexuality is neither a mental health disorder (Catri, 2021; Hinderliter, 2013; Prause & Graham, 2007) nor a sexual dysfunction (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, asexual people do not consider their lack of sexual attraction as related to religious expectations (Brotto & Milani, 2022) and view it as distinct from hypoactive sexual desire disorder or a fear of intimacy (Bogaert, 2015; Brotto & Yule, 2017; Guz et al., 2022; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

As mentioned previously, asexuality is commonly defined as little to no sexual attraction within both asexual communities and research (Bogaert, 2015; Carrigan, 2011; Gupta, 2015). However, conceptualising asexuality in this way brings forth several discrepancies surrounding asexual individuals' past or current sexual experiences and behaviours (Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Milani, 2022; Brotto & Yule, 2017). For example, while asexual individuals are more likely to report fewer sexual partners and lower frequency of sex (Bogaert, 2012; Copulsky & Hammack, 2021; Hille et al., 2020), research suggests that many still engage in

sexual activity and have the capacity for sexual arousal (Edge et al., 2022; Guz et al., 2022). This obscurity also pertains to an individual's ability to affirm whether or not they have experienced sexual attraction – and the definition thereof - and the cut-off points that surround this (Catri, 2021). Moreover, this definition may exclude those who experience varying levels of sexual attraction and contradicts the movement towards diversity in the asexual community and the growing awareness of asexuality as an "umbrella term" (Catri, 2021). Despite this, I do not deny the use of this definition among members of the asexual community and recognise its relevance to those who consider a lack of sexual attraction as integral to their identity. Instead, I posit that basing asexuality on a lack of sexual attraction is by itself insufficient when identifying asexual individuals in research (Brotto et al., 2010; Catri, 2021).

Similarly, past research has attempted to conceptualise asexuality as a lack of sexual interest or desire, with several reports indicating that asexual individuals have significantly lower levels of sexual desire than non-asexual people (Prause & Graham, 2007). For example, evidence suggests that while some asexual individuals engage in sexual behaviours, their reasons for doing so does not stem from sexual desire (Scherrer, 2008) but rather, a willingness to support their partner or as a result of societal pressure (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 201a; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). However, consistent with the points made above, this definition fails to acknowledge the diverse identities that exist with the asexual community as well as how we determine the presence or absence of sexual desire. Moreover, defining asexuality as a lack of sexual desire does not exhaustively cover prevalent attitudes and experiences among asexual people (Carrigan, 2011; Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022).

This brings forth the concept of self-identification to define asexuality and the opportunity to freely-identify with a label that best describes one's sexual

orientation (Guz et al., 2022). The criterion of self-identification is the most widely used in research (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Catri, 2021; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and implies that those without a sexual drive would not be considered asexual if they did not identify as such (Catri, 2021). Moreover, this way of defining asexuality is endorsed by asexual communities and is believed to foster the emergence of multiple sub-identities (Catri, 2021). However, there is much debate surrounding the use of self-identification to define asexuality, with some suggesting that this may pathologise asexuality and exclude those who are unaware of the orientation (Catri, 2021). For example, conceptualising asexuality as an identity alone may be suggestive of asexuality and sexual desire disorders as objectively the same (Catri, 2021; Chasin, 2015). Moreover, the exclusion of those who lack sexual attraction but are unaware of the term asexuality is reinforced by the relatively unknown nature of the orientation and limited exposure to asexuality beyond online communities (Catri, 2021; Cuthbert, 2019; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). This encouraged me to further consider how I conceptualise asexuality in my own research and how I may inadvertently exclude members of the asexual population who are not exposed to the discourses and languages seen in the asexual community (Cuthbert, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

1.1.1 *Conceptualising Asexuality - Heterogeneity*

As our understanding of asexuality increases (Chasin, 2015), so too does our awareness of the asexual population as being heterogenous with a variety of experiences and sub-identities (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Brotto & Yule, 2017; Carrigan, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). To facilitate this broad range of identities, the "asexual spectrum" has emerged as a way to define asexuality (Catri,

2021; Hille et al., 2020). This includes various "ace" identities that have features of asexuality (Brotto & Milani, 2022; Fiorini, 2022), or derive from the original meaning: a lack of sexual attraction (Decker, 2015). Moreover, this recognition has brought forth new terminologies or labels including demi-sexuality, gray-asexuality and sex-neutral (Copulsky & Hammack, 2021; Guz et al., 2022; Siggy, 2015). For example, the gray-asexual spectrum (i.e., the "gray" area between asexuality and allosexuality) includes individuals who are sex-repulsed (i.e., repelled by sexual activity), sex-neutral (i.e., do not experience sexual attraction but are not repelled by sexual activity), gray-asexual (i.e., may experience sexual attraction) and demi-sexual (i.e., may experience sexual desire after an emotional bond is formed) (Carrigan, 2011; Copulsky & Hammack, 2021; Decker, 2015).

Romantic orientation acts as an additional facet of asexuality and brings forth a more expansive view of the orientation (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Decker, 2015; Guz et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). Specifically, there is a movement towards distinguishing romantic and sexual identities within research and understanding variability in asexual individuals' experiences as a result of their romantic attraction (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). For example, there are multiple romantic orientations within the asexual population, with individuals applying labels such as heteroromantic, biromantic and homoromantic (Copulsky, 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). Moreover, for some asexual people, their romantic orientation takes precedence in their identification, with some opting for labels that align with their romantic identities (i.e., biromantic and bisexual, panromantic and pansexual) (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Chasin, 2015; Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). As I carried out my PhD studies, I became more aware of the diversity that underlies asexuality and discrepancies in

experiences reported by asexual individuals. This encouraged me to move beyond an understanding of asexuality as a singular identity and conceptualise asexual individuals as a heterogenous group.

1.1.2 *Defining Asexuality within the Current Research*

As discussed previously, there is no set way to define asexuality, nor a clear answer surrounding how we might conceptualise the orientation (Catri, 2021). Currently, we are unable to distinguish whether asexuality is best understood as a sexual identity, sexual orientation, lack of sexual orientation or whether these are mutually exclusive (Catri, 2021). Asexuality is, however, conceptualised in this thesis as identification along the asexual spectrum, with varying levels of sexual attraction. I use this definition throughout my research, both when defining asexuality and when recruiting participants. Amalgamating both self-identification and a lack of sexual attraction criteria allows me to compensate for issues associated with both definitions and arguably provides the most accurate representation of the asexual population (Catri, 2021). Moreover, this conceptualisation corresponds with AVEN's definition of asexuality as "a word that people use to help figure themselves out, then communicate that part of themselves to others", and emphasises the importance of self-identification and participants' freedom to choose their own labels (Brotto & Milani, 2022; Catri, 2021; Cergol, 2022; Guz et al., 2022).

When carrying out each study, I remain aware of the criticisms that surround this definition and discuss this as a limitation in my research. Moreover, I have taken note of the asexual community's decision not to support rigid definitions of asexuality and maintain an openness towards varying sexual and romantic identities. In completing this research, I employ a social constructionist perspective to study

asexuality. This helps me to move beyond essentialist or "binary" categories of human sexuality (Laumann et al., 2000; Poston & Baumle, 2010) and conceptualise asexuality as existing along a spectrum. Moreover, this approach aligns with how I define asexuality and again, corresponds with the intentions and views of the asexual community.

1.2 Identity Development and Asexuality

Parts of someone's identity such as their race, gender, religion, age and sexuality play a key role in how they understand their position within society, as well as how they make sense of the opportunities and challenges that they face. In psychology, this involves an awareness of the qualities that are unique to them as an individual and is strongly associated with their self-image, sense of belonging and evaluation of their self-worth (Höglund et al., 2014). Because of this, developing a positive sense of identity is fundamental to well-being, confidence, sense of belonging and ultimately, how someone sees themselves (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). However, aspects of someone's identity may influence how they are perceived in society as well as their interactions with others. For example, a lack of acceptance may hinder the development of a positive sense of identity and in some cases, cause an individual to integrate negative attitudes or ideals into their own self-worth. This in turn, may result in anxiety, insecurity and in some instances may be detrimental to an individuals' mental health (Thoits, 2013).

> *"While the production of identity is a social-psychological process, the consequences of identity are both social and political"* - Rust, 1992, p. 366

My initial conceptualisation of an asexual identity was formed on the basis of Erikson's Theory of Identity (1968). This theory, which is considered foundational

in our current understanding of identity, proposed that it is essential to explore and integrate various aspects of one's individuality including one's sexual orientation (Parmenter et al., 2022). This is in turn, may lead to a sense of autonomy and the achievement of a unified sense of self (Arnett, 2007). Specifically, Erikson (1968) proposed that this process involves identity formation (i.e., the assertion and expression of an identity) and identity integration (i.e., commitment to and acceptance of an identity). If identity integration is not achieved, an individual may develop a sense of "diffusion" and an awareness of themselves as "other" or inauthentic (Erikson, 1968). Although this model provides the foundation from which our current understanding of identity development arose (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989), other theories emerged that are specific to the processes that surround sexual identity. For example, stage-based models such as Cass's Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation (1979) describe elements of identity development specific to sexual minorities. This includes identity confusion, comparison, tolerance/acceptance, commitment, pride and integration. Other theories include processes of self-discovery and exploration, questioning one's sexuality (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989), disclosure and commitment (Rosario et al., 2006).

Although these theories are widely recognised and cited (Hall et al., 2021), more recent models have adopted a less universal process which suggest that not all sexual minorities follow the same trajectory of identity development (Parmenter et al., 2022). Within D'Augelli's Model of Sexual Identity Development (1994), identity is formed by our interactions with our environment and sexual orientation is considered a dynamic characteristic that is subject to differences based on experiences. This move beyond stage-based models brings into consideration sexual

identity development as both an independent and multifaceted process, that is subject to the integration of multiple aspects of identity. For example, later models have highlighted how other marginalised identities such as gender (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and ethnicity (Jamil et al., 2009) impact identity coherence and the achievement of a unified sense of self (Galliher et al., 2017). Moreover, there is increasing interest in how sexual minorities manage conflicts associated with their identities and interrelated systems of oppression or privilege that impact their identity development (Parmenter et al., 2022). Thus, in this thesis, I conceptualise asexual identity development from a multi-dimensional perspective to include various domains of identity including gender and romantic orientation. This provides a more holistic understanding of the processes that surround the identity development of asexual individuals and the experiences most often associated with this population.

Although there are many similarities in the development of asexual and LGB identities (Bogaert, 2006; Foster et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2020; Scherrer, 2008), recent evidence suggests that there are several aspects unique to an asexual identity. Robbins et al., (2016) and Van Houdenhove et al., (2015) proposed unique experiences associated with asexuality such as pathologisation of a lack of sexual attraction, as well as limited information and the role of the asexual community. For example, heightened levels of confusion and difficulty describing one's sexual identity, causes many asexual individuals to seek information online (Foster et al., 2019; Scherrer, 2008). This combined with a lack of awareness surrounding asexuality (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), increases the significance of asexual communities to foster the expression of personal identities and allow asexual individuals to communicate and share their experiences (DeLuzio

Chasin, 2011; Foster et al., 2019). Moreover, disclosing one's sexual identity may be uniquely challenging for asexual individuals given the relatively unknown nature of asexuality and a lack of associated behaviours (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). This in turn, may result in negative reactions towards an individual's asexuality including dismissal and denial from others (Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

As a result, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in studying the processes that underlie asexual identity development (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a) with an increase in empirical research and theoretical articles (Mollet, 2020). Despite this growth in research surrounding asexuality, there is currently no standardised tool for describing the self-concepts of asexual individuals, or statistical examination of how internalised asexuality relates to mental health. Thus, developing a measure to assess the features that underly asexual identity development may allow us to better understand how this process relates to the mental health and wellbeing of asexual individuals (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b).

1.2.1 *Social Construction of Sexual Identity*

As mentioned previously, I apply social constructionist theory within my understanding of asexual individuals' identity development. Specifically, social constructionist theory implies that knowledge and a sense of one's identity is profoundly socially and historically constructed (Foucault, 1978; Rust, 1992). Moreover, it proposes that sexual identity, like most identities is formed based on available cultural scripts, time and context, as well as "the interpretation of personal experiences in terms of available social constructs" (Kennon, 2021; Rust, 1992, p. 68). In the context of my PhD studies, these cultural or societal scripts surround

"compulsory sexuality" whereby asexuality challenges the norm that everyone experiences sexual attraction and disrupts both heteronormative and queer spaces (Kennon, 2021).

As a non-linear approach to sexual identity development, social constructivism recognises variability and change in human sexuality and the uniqueness of experiences associated with this (Kennon, 2021). This corresponds with the heterogenous nature of the asexual population and the role that both gender and romantic identity may play in asexual identity development. Moreover, this perspective allows for a more complex understanding of identity development in terms of order and timing, and moves beyond "predetermined" or stage-based models (Kennon, 2021). This is in contrast to more linear models of sexual identity formation which fail to account for individual differences or discrepancies that may exist as a result of culture, timing or other facets of identity (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). According to Rust (1993), social constructionism posits that in order for an individual to self-identify, they must first be exposed to the available social constructs and draw interpretations from this. However, if these constructs are not socially or culturally accessible to them, this may impede the development of that part of their identity. This is relevant to the limited awareness of asexuality and invisibility of the asexual community, as well as my understanding of asexual identity as a multidimensional construct (DeLuzio Chasin, 2011; Kennon, 2021). Furthermore, when integrating social constructionism in my own understanding of asexuality, I was brought to consider how an individual's self-esteem may be subject to self-acceptance and social comparison (Hewitt, 2020). For example, as asexual individuals strive for self-acceptance, they must navigate experiences that underly their asexuality while attempting to develop a sense of identity that does not fit the cultural norm (Hewitt, 2020).

1.2.2 *Identity Development and Psychological Adjustments*

The integration of a positive sense of identity has been linked to psychological adjustments among non-heterosexual individuals. For example, the ability to disclose one's sexual identity and gain a sense of community, as well as more positive attitudes towards sexual minorities (D'Augelli, 1994; Morris et al., 2001) are associated with greater psychological wellbeing (Rosario et al., 2006; Wright & Perry, 2006). This is seen in research whereby a more positive sense of identity is associated with better mental health outcomes and unsupportive environments are shown to inhibit sexual identity development (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Rosario et al., 2006, 2011). Moreover, individuals who have successfully integrated their sexual identity are found to have higher self-esteem when compared to those who have experienced ridicule and rejection (Halpin & Allen, 2004). These mental health disparities among sexual minorities may be interpreted through the Minority Stress Framework (Meyer, 2003) in which stress is experienced as a result of discrimination and internalised heterosexism (Russell & Fish, 2016). For example, stigma may result in stress responses such as expectation of rejection, concealment of identity and internalisation of negative attitudes and beliefs about one's sexuality (Meyer, 2015; Sun et al., 2020). Moreover, heteronormativity, or the belief that heterosexuality is the default societal configuration, may also play a role in heightened levels of mental health difficulties (Alibudbud, 2021). For example, binary understandings of sexuality (i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality) and norms relating to gender (i.e., masculine and feminine gender roles), may cause those who deviate from these to consider themselves as "other" (Corlett et al., 2022).

1.2.3 *Psychological Adjustments among Asexual Individuals*

Mental health has been shown to differ between asexual and other non-heterosexual individuals (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, research suggests that asexual people experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression when compared to both their heterosexual (i.e., straight) and non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual) peers (Yule et al., 2013). Moreover, many asexual people display elevated levels of social withdrawal and interpersonal problems (Brotto & Milani, 2022; Gupta, 2017; McInroy et al., 2020), as well as acceptance concerns and identity uncertainty (Brown et al., 2022; Mollet, 2020; Su & Zheng, 2022). The prevalence of these mental health issues may be attributed to allonormativity whereby "sexual desire is considered a key component of human nature, and those lacking it are viewed as relatively deficient, less human and disliked" (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012, p. 739) This in turn, may result in stigmatisation and the dehumanisation of asexuality (Scherrer, 2008) as well as elevated levels of ridicule, disbelief, and the dismissal of their sexual identity (Mollet, 2020; Przybylo, 2013). Furthermore, many asexual individuals report sexual pressure from partners (Przybylo, 2013; Yule et al., 2013) and are viewed as "boring" or "weird" when they do not show sexual interest or disclose their sexuality (Brown et al., 2022; Gupta, 2017; MacInnis & Hodson, 2012, p. 731). The sources of these negative attitudes can vary, but stem predominantly from partners, friends and family, as well as social, educational and clinical misunderstandings (Kelleher et al., 2022).

1.2.4 *Intersectionality and Asexual identity Development*

Intersectionality theory allows us to understand how systems of inequality such as heterosexism, racism and sexism may create unique consequences for

marginalised people (Moradi, 2017). These domains of identity may affect an individual's self-understanding and cause those who are outside the norm to be subjected to oppression and discrimination (Moradi, 2017; Parmenter et al., 2022). Applying this framework allows me to examine intersectional circumstances in relation to asexuality and grants a with a more holistic understanding of asexual identity development (Parmenter et al., 2022). Moreover, studying sexuality through an intersectional lens allows me to better understand how multiple social statuses shape an individual's experience and pertains to minority stress and overall wellbeing (Frost et al., 2020). This is seen in research whereby the development of a sexual minority identity in conjunction with other facets of marginalised identities may result in psychological distress (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). Equally, the successful negotiation of intersecting identities may contribute towards increased identity coherence (Crawford et al., 2002; Parmenter et al., 2022).

As mentioned previously, the asexual population is heterogenous with the presence of varying experiences and sub-identities. Alongside a diverse range of romantic identities (Brotto et al., 2010; Catri, 2021; Su & Zheng, 2022), many members of the asexual community have been shown to reject gender binaries, with some endorsing a gender identity that does not align with their sex at birth (Gazzola & Morrison, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Moreover, while all members of the asexual community identify along the asexual spectrum, many report sexual attraction under some conditions (Catri, 2021). As I carried out my research, I became increasingly aware of the heterogenous nature of the asexual population (Kelleher et al., 2022; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and the wide array of experiences that underly this. This encouraged me to consider how additional systems of oppression associated with gender roles and romantic identity may shape

the lives of asexual people. To do this, I adopt an intersectional approach to studying asexual identity development in the later parts of this thesis. Specifically, I utilise intersectional framework theory to identify commonalities and differences across participants' accounts that appear specific to their romantic and gender identities. This in turn allows me to observe how gender roles and romantic orientation intersect within the development of an asexual identity and further illustrates the complexity of this experience.

1.3 The Current Research

As the number of those expressing a lack of sexual attraction continues to rise, so too does the need for research to fully uncover the nature of asexuality and the experiences of asexual people. The asexual community, allies and researchers alike, are becoming increasingly concerned with uncovering the processes that surround asexual identity development and in doing so, aim to alleviate mental health issues associated with the orientation. Upon formulating this thesis, I recognised a lack of information surrounding the experiences of being asexual and the processes that underlie asexual identity development (Carrigan, 2011; Pinto, 2018; Scherrer, 2008). When reviewing the literature, it became apparent that this relatively "invisible orientation" (Carrigan, 2011; Decker, 2015; Pinto, 2018; Scherrer, 2008) had received minimal academic attention and thus motivated me to better understand this understudied phenomenon (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, this encouraged me to examine the identity trajectories of asexual people and gain a more nuanced understanding of the diverse nature of the orientation. As mentioned previously, while distinctions within the asexual community are becoming increasingly recognised and understood, there

remains little empirical evidence in understanding how experiences differ across the asexual spectrum (Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). To date, research has paid little attention to uncovering sub-identities that exist in the asexual community as well as the nuances that underly gender and romantic orientation (Copulsky & Hammack, 2021). Thus, my research moves beyond the notion that asexuality is just a lack of sexual attraction and provides extended insight into the role of gender and romantic orientation when navigating relationships, disclosure and interpersonal interactions.

1.3.1 *Research Aims and Objectives*

Through a series of discrete but related research papers, this research aimed to achieve the following:

1. Examine features of asexual identity development and the processes that underlie how/if asexual individuals internalise societal messages held towards their orientation.
2. Identify components of asexual identity development in the context of an allonormative and heteronormative society, with an added focus on the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities.
3. Assess dimensions of the lives of asexual people through quantitative methods and develop a valid and reliable measure of asexual identity development.

To do this, I asked a series of questions including:

- What empirical research, both published and unpublished, has been generated about the development of an asexual identity?
- What attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences specific to asexual individuals shape their self-concept and understanding of their asexual identity?

- How do asexual individuals develop a sense of identity within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society and what are the implications that this may have for their wellbeing?
- How do gender roles and romantic identities impact the development of an asexual identity?
- What are the personal and societal factors that inform the development of an asexual identity and, specifically, do asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation and if so, how?

1.3.2 *Thesis Structure*

The following thesis is composed of a series of academic articles published or under review in international journals on sexualities. The papers are presented in the order that they have been carried out and are each preceded by a supplementary chapter that gives extended rationale for their design and implementation. Although the methodology for each study is presented in their respective chapter, supplementary chapters (chapters two, four, six and eight) describe specific methodological considerations for each piece of research than were presented in the individual research papers. This includes participant information and sampling procedures, philosophical underpinnings and data analysis, study design and ethical considerations. Moreover, in these supplementary chapters, the discussion of each study is accompanied by a chapter summary and how each study contributes to the overall thesis aims and objectives.

In chapter three, I present the publication *Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence* (in Psychology & Sexuality, 2022). As the asexual orientation continues to grow in

profile within academic research, I felt compelled to conduct a comprehensive analysis of literature and synthesise all available evidence. Specifically, this study outlines current knowledge of asexual identity development and highlights gaps present in research. Moreover, this review highlights how heteronormative beliefs and allonormative assumptions cause many individuals to adopt negative attitudes towards their asexuality and hinders the development of a positive self-concept. Findings from this study informed the research design and protocol for research presented in chapters five, seven and nine, and confirmed the absence of a psychometric scale measuring dimensions of asexual identity development.

In chapter five, I present the second publication *The Identity Development and Internalisation of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (in Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 2022). Through the accounts of five self-identified asexual women, this study examines how heteronormativity and allonormativity impacts asexual identity development and highlights the role of romantic orientation within this process. Moreover, as this study focused on the identity development of asexual women, this brought me to consider how this may differ on the basis of gender.

In chapter seven, I present the third publication *Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis* (in Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 2022). This study details the accounts of 99 asexual people with varying romantic and gender identities and demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and romantic orientation in asexual identity development. Moreover, through a focus on the diverse nature of the asexual community, this research provides a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of asexual people and contributes

towards the development of a robust and psychometrically sound measure. This paper is the first of its kind to be conducted with a specific focus on the heterogeneous nature of the asexual population and provides a substantial exploration of the theoretical implications of each theme.

In chapter nine, I present *Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: The Development of a Psychometric Measure* (under peer-review). This study describes the development of the 37-item Assessment of Asexual Identity Development Scale (AAID) which measures variables unique to asexuality and assesses dimensions of the lives of asexual people. As the first psychometric measure of its kind, this is a reliable and useful tool to evaluate the processes that surround the development of an asexual identity and contributes substantially to the currently growing body of literature on asexuality. Moreover, this study provides a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge in clinical settings to better evaluate the processes contributing to the development of an asexual identity in the context of an allonormative society.

In chapter ten, I present a discussion and critical appraisal of this thesis and further outline the theoretical and practical implications of my research findings. I pay particular attention to asexual identity development within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society and how my findings align with current models of sexual identity. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of this research and provide recommendations for future studies.

1.3.3 *Thesis Contribution*

This thesis acts as a significant contribution to our understanding of the key concepts and experiences that underly the development of an asexual identity.

Findings correspond with current theoretical models of both asexual and other non-heterosexual identity development, and experiences of minority stress that accompany these statuses in a heteronormative and allonormative society. Moreover, this thesis provides an account of the varying developmental trajectories witnessed among people of an asexual identity and presents a more inclusive insight into the experience of being asexual. This is seen throughout my studies, and in particular, in my discussion of the heterogenous nature of the asexual community and the presence of diverse participant pools. Findings also contribute towards our ability to more accurately define asexuality and outline distinctions between romantic and sexual attraction. Research outputs arising from this thesis contribute towards our understanding and visibility of asexuality and will help eliminate stigmatisation and dehumanisation of this minority sexual identity. Specifically, through a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods, the output of this research informs design and analytical procedures to direct future research agendas. This will provide a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better evaluate the processes contributing to the heightened levels of depression and anxiety amongst asexual individuals. Ultimately, this research will promote a growing openness towards diversity and varied human sexualities.

1.3.4 *Thesis Reflection*

As I enter the final stage of my PhD journey, I reflect upon the skills and knowledge that I gained, as well as the opportunities and challenges that I faced. Like all journeys, the most crucial parts arose from situations that placed me outside of my comfort zone and encouraged me to expand my understanding of the subject

area and hone my research abilities. I believe the quote from Charles Kettering accurately portrays this process whereby "*research means that you don't know, but you are willing to find out*". In the context of my studies, this involved my initial exposure to asexuality and efforts to accurately and rigorously study the experiences of asexual people. I found that I quickly learned of the unique identities that encompass the asexual community and gained a strong capacity to portray this within my research. Whether it was completing my scoping review, or carrying out empirical studies, I felt that my knowledge of the area was ever-expanding and I became increasingly aware of the voice of the participant. Throughout my research I reflected on the purpose and design of each study and attempted to create a "story" that would guide the reader through each phase of my thesis. This encouraged me to better integrate both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and to accurately present my research as a whole. In the following reflection, I discuss briefly the knowledge and experiences that I gained throughout my PhD studies. This includes an account of what I have learned, how I developed as a researcher, what challenges emerged and how I dealt with them.

Participants' willingness to take part in my research far exceeded my expectations and I achieved numbers that went well beyond preconceived sample sizes. Although I had initially aimed for ten to twelve participants to complete my open-ended questionnaire (study three), I was taken aback when I received over 150 responses. Similarly, while I had aimed for 600 participants to take part in the development of the AAID (study four), I was again surprised to find that over 1600 had completed the survey. Although these large datasets increased my workload substantially, they allowed me to gain further insight into asexuality and better examine the nuances that underly the asexual community. Ultimately, participants'

efforts to engage in each study assured me of its relevance to the asexual community and the overall contribution that my research will make.

As a sexuality researcher, I faced several challenges surrounding the presentation of participants' experiences and accurate portrayal of their accounts. This involved an awareness of my position as an outsider to the asexual community and efforts to engage with dialogue and discussions held within this group. I remained aware of my role in telling asexual peoples' stories and recognised the need to describe their accounts both accurately and sensitively. In doing this, I evidenced their resilience and resourcefulness when developing their asexual identities and ensured that I did not inadvertently contribute towards the erasure or denigration of asexual people. This aligns with the ethos of researchers who work in human sexuality to advance the interests of non-heterosexual individuals and groups. These efforts also benefitted my allyship to the asexual community which I considered as someone "who provides support to those who identify as members of the LGBTQQIA community" (Pinto, 2014, p. 331).

Throughout my research, I actively worked towards gaining an awareness of the nuances that underly the asexual community and the various phrases and terminologies used to describe asexual identities. Alongside extensive reading and academic study, I scrolled through websites and online communities, searched forums and read articles published by asexual individuals. These conversations and 'confessionals' allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of asexual people, as well as the taxonomies and classifications used among this group. This enhanced my awareness of the diverse nature of asexuality and encouraged me to not to assume participants' sexual and romantic identities. I also believe this contributed to the relative ease in which I carried out interviews,

designed questionnaires and benefitted my ability to carry out empirical research. Ultimately, this helped me to become more aware of how I present myself to the asexual community and accurately state the purpose and aims of my research.

A major goal when beginning my PhD was to publish my research in peer-reviewed journals. Although I initially lacked experience in the peer-review process, I became increasingly familiar with the steps involved and the quality of work required. Admittedly, this was a laborious and often time-consuming process, which saw some papers receive several revisions. It was, however, highly beneficial to my learning experience and motivated me to present my research with both clarity and rigour. Overall, I found reviewer feedback incredibly helpful and that it honed my skills as a researcher. The review process also encouraged me state explicitly how I incorporated different analyses within my research and to go into detail when contextualising the lives of participants. This in turn, allowed me to outline every decision made in my research and brought me to better organise the presentation of each paper. Publishing my research has made me feel that I am contributing towards the research area by raising awareness of asexuality and the lives of asexual people.

Working remotely during the Covid-19 stay-at-home order brought forth several challenges to the undertaking of my PhD thesis. Although completing a PhD is typically thought to be a relatively isolated experience, I felt that working from home compounded this. Removing myself from the department's shared PhD office and leaving behind such a supportive social environment often left me feeling secluded from my academic community and lacking the motivation to carry out my research. That being said, I am grateful for the focus that the PhD programme provided and the sense of purpose I gained when working on my research. During this time, I looked for alternative ways to maintain contact with my colleagues in the

department and was fortunate to receive continuous support from my supervisors. I took part in online writing clubs hosted by fellow PhD students and allocated spare time to completing external projects with my supervisor, Dr Mike Murphy. While it is easy to look back with rose-tinted glasses, I can honestly say that the support I received within my department, as well as my determination to carry out my research, helped me to overcome many of the hurdles that I experienced during this time.

To conclude my reflection, I am brought to consider how I developed as the author of this thesis. Of particular note is my learning on 'the qualitative journey' and how my engagement within the field of asexuality shaped the research process. Specifically, I believe that my desire to carry out research reflexively allowed me to acknowledge both my epistemological and methodological stances and constituted much of the research findings. Although my supervisors contributed substantially to the conceptualisation and subsequent completion of each study, I struggled initially to take ownership of my research and rely upon my own decision making. It took me some time to identify myself as an expert in the area and gain confidence in my ability to make decisions and control the direction of my research. By taking on the role of a project manager, I noticed a major growth in my skill as an academic researcher and knowledge of the methodologies that I employed. I also learned how to appropriately plan and execute each study, as well as how to deal with any issues when they arise. Gaining an appreciation for research is a major success of mine and I now recognise the curiosity, determination and collaboration that it requires.

Chapter 2 Scoping Review: Supplementary Methodology

Asexuality as a sexual identity is becoming increasingly recognised within research, with a growth in awareness campaigns and outreach activities. Accordingly, there has been a steep rise in studies examining asexuality and the experience of being asexual (Kelleher et al., 2022). When I began my PhD studies and immersed myself within literature, I noticed that there were no available articles synthesising the research area. By observing this gap in research and recognising the value of a literature review to the conceptualisation of each study, I began the first article included in this thesis.

In chapter three, I examine then-current knowledge of asexuality and the processes that underly asexual identity development and internalisation. This is presented in the form of a scoping review of literature published between the 1st of January 2000 and the 1st of July 2021. This initial study was crucial in establishing what empirical research has been generated about asexuality, as well as determining the attitudes, values and beliefs that shape how asexual individuals develop a sense of identity. Moreover, this allowed me to identify what gaps were present in the literature and what has been recommended for future progression in the area. Due to restrictions on word count in the research paper, much of the detail related to the search procedure and data extraction could not be comprehensively described. The focus of this supplementary chapter is to provide the reader with additional information and context in relation to the scoping review paper. This includes detailed discussion of methodological considerations, search procedures and analysis used. This is followed by a chapter summary and contribution to the overall thesis aims and objectives.

2.1 Methodology and Rationale

The decision to perform a scoping review as opposed to other forms of literature review (e.g., systematic review, narrative review, rapid review), was based on the exploratory nature of the research area and the broad questions that underlie the initial parts of this thesis. As a less restrictive way of synthesising literature, I felt that a scoping review was a particularly suitable way to map relevant articles in both a rigorous and reproducible manner (Moher et al., 2015; Verdejo et al., 2021). This allowed me to provide a preliminary examination of the literature that was not limited to a specific research question or methodology (Thomas et al., 2017) and gave me the freedom to perform either numerical or thematic analysis when interpreting findings (Dennhardt et al., 2016). Moreover, the iterative nature of a scoping review enhanced the flexibility of my search procedures and contributed towards the synthesisation of relevant literature (Dennhardt et al., 2016). When carrying out this review, I adhered to methods outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and the Joanna Briggs Institute, with the aims to better define concepts surrounding asexuality, outline differences across sources and establish how research had been carried out in the area. This in turn, allowed me to identify what gaps were present in the literature and design studies that would later address this.

Throughout the review paper, I provide clear examples of search procedures and account for the inclusion/exclusion of each article (Khalil et al., 2016). Moreover, by enlisting the services of a librarian and availing of additional researchers to screen articles, I provide findings in a transparent and rigorous manner (Anderson et al., 2008; Levac et al., 2010). As recommended by Verdejo et al., (2021), searches were carried out reflectively, with the repetition of steps when

necessary. This ensured a balance between the breadth of literature included in this paper and the detailed analysis of my findings (Verdejo et al., 2021). Moreover, as scoping reviews do not typically evaluate the quality of literature, or impose a strict quality guideline (Levac et al., 2010; Verdejo et al., 2021), this allowed me to include papers from a wide array of sources (e.g., Grey literature, electronic databases, journals websites, bibliographies). Finally, my use of a PRISMA flow diagram when reporting search procedures enhanced the transparency and readability of the entire search strategy and findings (Harms & Goodwin, 2019; Peters et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2014; Verdejo et al., 2021).

2.2 Search Procedure

The most challenging aspect of this scoping review involved the selection of key words to be included in search strings and the implementation of search strategies. Through a trial-and-error approach to review, I completed several literature searches across multiple timelines. This led to the search process becoming quite iterative in nature, a feature common among scoping reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Dennhardt et al., 2016). Upon completing the first and second literature search, and as I began the data extraction process, I identified multiple articles that ideally would have appeared in the initial list of papers. Moreover, as I began to review papers and became more familiar with the research area, I noticed that several key terms were not included in my previous searches. Specifically, I found that as knowledge and awareness of asexual identity development has grown so rapidly, the way that it is discussed and referred to in literature has changed considerably. This led me to encounter a wide array of definitions and vocabulary, as

well as the existence of multiple orientations and sub-identities that fall within the realm of asexuality.

Following the first and second iteration of my searches, I determined that the concept of asexual identity development was not adequately represented. To ascertain all essential articles, I ran a third search and expanded terms to include "identity development" or "identity formation" or "identity construction". This yielded eleven additional articles and greatly improved the accuracy of my results. Moreover, this extended the timeline of my review by fifteen months and encompassed all literature published up to the 1st of July 2021. Completing my searches through a three-stage iterative process proved to be an instrumental factor in the success of this review and allowed me to observe directly how my search procedure was improved after familiarising myself with the literature and interactions with the data.

2.3 Charting and Analysing the Data

Throughout the data extraction process, I ensured that the table used to chart data accurately represented all relevant features of the literature. This involved repeated meetings with the research team and refining what should be included in the table (Levac et al., 2010). The fields used to compile data and represent key features from articles are as follows: author(s) information, year of publication and location; sample information, age, gender and sample size; research design, study design, method of analysis and data collection; and relevant themes. When extracting data, I met intermittently with other members of the research team to check the quality of data entry and compare findings for similarities and discrepancies. Again, this was a

highly iterative process, as I continuously reflected on how I charted and extracted the data (Hanneke et al., 2017). Moreover, as I carried out additional searches, I compared findings across papers and considered how information gained from one article shed light on how I understood and extracted data from another. This encouraged me to continuously update the data included in the table and further reinforced the iterative nature of this study (Levac et al., 2010). As the majority of studies included in this review were qualitative, with the exception of three mixed-methods and three quantitative reports, findings were analysed using qualitative coding (Hanneke et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2020). Moreover, as I was concerned with findings that pertained to asexual identity development and internalisation, I focused on features specific to this. Again, I met regularly with the research team to review coding and ensure that all relevant information was extracted from the included articles.

2.4 Chapter Summary

I begin this paper by providing an overview of the definitional issues that surround asexuality and criteria for conceptualising asexual identity development in research. This is followed by an introduction to sexual identity distress and how it may be linked to psychological distress among asexual individuals. I also provide extended rationale for the study design and decision to carry out a scoping review, as well as the process of identifying studies to be included in this paper. I then present the eight major themes that appeared throughout literature and examine the role of heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality within asexual identity development and internalisation. Finally, I discuss the relatively heterogenous nature of the asexual community and outline study limitations and future recommendations.

Completing this study granted an initial understanding of the theoretical models surrounding asexuality and how they compare to other models of non-heterosexual identity development. Moreover, collating research articles on asexuality allowed me to better define and conceptualise asexual identities, and recognise the distinctions between romantic and sexual attraction, as well as the role of heteronormative and allonormative assumptions. This helped me to achieve the initial parts of my research aims and objectives and was beneficial to later study design and theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 3 Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence (Study 1)

Sinéad Kelleher, University College Cork

Mike Murphy, University College Cork

Xin Su, University College Cork

This chapter is an exact copy of the journal paper referred to above.

3.1 Abstract

Individuals who do not experience sexual attraction and adopt an asexual identity are the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research. A scoping review was conducted to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. Findings from 29 articles were analysed and formed into themes that best describe the key events and sense-making processes underlying identity development, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their identity. These findings indicate that heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality play a role in how individuals internalise their asexuality, which in turn, shapes their identity development. Despite this, considerable gaps in the literature concerning partner relationships, stigmatisation, isolation and the impact that this has on asexuals' wellbeing continue to exist. Thus, future research should examine the challenges faced by asexuals such as identity development within a heteronormative and allonormative context and the resources available to ameliorate them.

Key words: Asexuality, Identity, Sexuality, Internalisation, Challenges

3.1.1 *Personal Identification and Philosophical Orientation*

The authors acknowledge and accept that asexuality is valid and real. This research was conducted with the aim to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. In doing this, we seek to accurately and sensitively relay information surrounding asexuality and enrich our understanding of sexuality and the philosophy behind sex and sexual attraction. We believe that this research contributes towards a growing awareness and understanding of asexuality and may help to reverse myths and negative assumptions surrounding asexuality.

We believe that asexual experiences are diverse and accept the common definition of asexuality as a lack or absence of sexual attraction. We acknowledge that asexuality is not a behaviour, a form of celibacy or sexual desire disorder. We are also aware that many asexual people have romantic relationships and may engage in sexual activity. We recognise that the dismissal or stigmatisation of asexuality within everyday life may contribute towards psychological distress among asexual people and effect their identity development. We believe that our understanding of sex and sexuality can be enriched by studying asexuality.

3.2 Introduction

Asexuality as a sexual identity has increased in profile partly due to the emergence of social media outlets, the development of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and a growth in academic attention, beginning with Bogaert's (2004) demographic analysis in which a 1% prevalence rate of asexuality was recorded within a British sample (N > 18,000). According to Cuthbert (2019), asexuality is becomingly increasingly recognised within non-heterosexual

communities, mainstream media and popular culture. Because of this, asexuality has since been the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research (Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

3.2.1 *Definitional Issues*

According to Laumann et al., (2000), researchers' interest in sexuality can be categorised under three separate headings - namely, behaviour, desire and identity. This can include the use of a description-based approach to identifying a sexual orientation (i.e., sexual attraction/desire towards individuals of the opposite or same sex), a behavioural approach (i.e., a lack of sexual behaviour), as well as self-identification. Beginning with Storms' (1980) two-dimensional model of sexual orientation, academic literature has most frequently defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction or low sexual desire (Bogaert, 2006; Brotto & Yule, 2017; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011). Although this definition is widely used within literature (Prause & Graham, 2007), it is important to recognise that asexual individuals have the potential for sexual arousal, can engage in sexual behaviours and be romantically attracted to others (Bogaert, 2006). For example, some individuals may identify as asexual but still experience sexual attraction or engage in sexual behaviour, while others may define their asexuality through abstinence from sexual intercourse (Poston & Baumle, 2010). This in turn, indicates that asexuality may exist along a spectrum, with many asexual individuals experiencing varying levels of sexual attraction and varying attitudes towards sexual activity (Hammack et al., 2019). Moreover, when defining asexuality within research, there is increasing interest in the role of sexual and romantic dimensions among participants (Scherrer, 2008). Therefore, all criteria used to identify asexuality within research will be accepted as

relevant for the purpose of this review. This will better map the use of a focused definition within research.

3.2.2 *The Scope of Current Research*

Research into the area of asexuality has evolved following Bogaert's (2004) initial study, with an increasing focus on the experience of being asexual and associated psychological characteristics. Prause and Graham (2007) initiated such investigation, through the comparison of both sexual and self-identified asexual individuals and the features that distinguished both groups. Through this investigation, Prause and Graham (2007) characterised asexuality as a lack of sexual desire directed towards others, with many participants reporting few to no sexual experiences. Their findings prompted the development of further investigation that focused on the lived experiences of asexual participants, and how this may allow us to better understand and define asexuality. In light of this, research has focused largely on characteristics associated with asexuality, with some indicating similarities between asexuality and other sexual minority identities (Scherrer, 2008). Specifically, such investigations have focused on aspects of asexuality such as commonalities within the community (Carrigan, 2011), coming-out processes (Robbins et al., 2016) and experiences of stigmatisation and polarisation (Chasin, 2015). Through this, research has shown a higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with asexual individuals (Yule et al., 2013), with many attributing this to the effects of discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Lucassen et al., 2011). For example, MacInnis and Hodson, (2012, p. 738), reported anti-asexual bias held towards asexuals that was “equivalent to, or even more extreme, than bias held towards homosexuals and bisexuals”. These

negative sentiments held towards asexuality and a lack of acceptance from family, friends and professional misunderstandings (Chasin, 2015), appear to influence asexuals' self-concepts and the development of their asexual identities (McInroy et al., 2020). Thus, the process of integrating or internalising these sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming increasingly studied among asexual individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Scherrer, 2008).

3.2.3 *Identity Development*

According to Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1987), identity is a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles, that is both organised and learned. Identity development is considered a critical psychosocial task across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968; McLean et al., 2015) and is a constructed story of how an individual comes to be who they currently are (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity is believed to develop at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels and comprises of individual, relational and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). Specifically, identity development may be considered the construction of an individuals' self-conceptualisation (Sharma & Sharma, 2010) that is influenced by both cultural and societal factors (Misra, 2007), and is largely studied to determine well-being (Thoits, 2013).

Although identity development is considered to manifest during childhood and early adolescence (Fivush, et al., 2015) it continues to develop and grow across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Thus, the development of an individual's identity can be considered an important lifelong process. According to (Stryker, 1980), identity involves the integration of 'blocks' which together, build a unified

self-concept that enables a person to function with coherence. As such, the development of a positive and well understood identity involves building self-esteem, exploring self-definition, reducing self-discrepancies and fostering role formation and achievement (Tsang et al., 2012). Because of this, research is becoming increasingly concerned with recognising the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual identity development among sexual-minority individuals and specifically, asexual individuals (Morgan, 2013).

3.2.4 *Asexual Identity Development*

Sexuality is considered an aspect of one's identity that can shape their entire character (Kietzer, 2015) and is believed to be affected by both internal and external factors (Mayer et al., 2014). Sexual identity can be conceptualised as involving the cognitive and emotional understanding of an individual's sexuality, including sexual attractions, desires, behaviours, values and relationships (Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2011). This understanding assists in forming a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's sexual identity (Morgan, 2013) and involves negotiating feelings of instability and transitions, as well as heightened self-focus and identity exploration (Arnett, 2007). However, while sexual identity development for non-heterosexual individuals can be an opportunity for exploration and self-discovery, it can simultaneously be inhibited or contrived (Torkelson, 2012).

The development of an individual's sexual minority identity typically involves a process of becoming aware of themselves as different from their peers, identifying with an orientation that corresponds with their sexual and romantic attractions and disclosing their sexuality to others (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). According to Cass's (1979) Theory of Sexual Identity Formation, identity

development among non-heterosexual individuals involves a process of questioning and becoming aware of one's sexuality, exploring that emerging identity and engaging in non-heterosexual related social and sexual activities (Cass, 1979). This process is believed to take time as individuals engage in self-questioning, experimentation and conflict (Rosario et al., 2006). The resulting identity integration is portrayed through both embracing and disclosing a non-heterosexual identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Despite the ongoing relevance of Cass's (1979) model, there is emerging evidence to suggest that sexual identity development does not follow a consistent route and is not stable from person to person (Morgan, 2013). Specifically, recent efforts have been made to account for the complex and dynamic nature of sexual identity to include a multidimensional model that operates at both an individual and societal level (Dillon et al., 2011).

Research suggests that there are many components specific to the development of an asexual identity that differ from the trajectory witnessed among other non-heterosexual groups (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, Robbins et al., (2016) proposed a model of identity development that contains experiences unique to asexual individuals. Within this model they suggest that a lack of information causes many asexuals to initially question the legitimacy of their asexuality and pathologise their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, the discovery of an asexual identity is considered a unique process within this model as asexual individuals typically gain information through online resources and asexuality-specific communities. Finally, disclosure is considered a crucial element within this model as external validation and the opportunity to educate others facilitates identity integration (Robbins et al., 2016). Interestingly, when investigating asexual identity formation, Winer et al., (2022), found that approximately half of asexual individuals adopt other sexual

identities earlier in their lives. In this respect, bisexuality and pansexuality may function as 'identity pathways' for many asexual individuals prior to the discovery of an asexual identity (Winer et al., 2022). Similar to the invisible nature of asexuality identified within previous models of identity development (Robbins et al., 2016), limited awareness of asexuality may cause many individuals to initially adopt a sexual identity that is more recognisable (Winer et al., 2022).

3.2.5 *Asexual Identity Development and Wellbeing*

Sexual identity distress has been shown to significantly predict psychological distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Wright & Perry, 2006). Specifically, anti-queer attitudes and heterosexism, can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation and discrimination which in turn, can negatively affect their sexual identity development (Anderson, 2020; Craig et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014). Moreover, marginalisation as a result of sexual identity can lead to higher rates of suicidality and suicidal ideation (di Giacomo et al., 2018), mental health disorders (Russell & Fish, 2016) and substance abuse (Day et al., 2017) among sexual minority youths. This evidence for the existence of stigma related prejudices against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population has recently been shown to include asexual individuals (Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). Because of this, the development of an asexual identity and the process of integrating or 'internalising' negative sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming an increasing focus of research.

During identity development, it is believed that an individual creates their self-image through experiences and associated meanings within their community (Jamil et al., 2009). However, as sexual minority youths are often raised within a

predominantly heteronormative society, they do not necessarily encounter similar others and often lack an initial exposure to non-heterosexual communities (Rosario et al., 2006). As a result, they may gain an understanding of society's negative regard towards a non-heterosexual identity and may experience a different developmental trajectory (Morgan, 2013). Like other sexual minority individuals, asexual individuals are believed to internalise their existence outside of heteronormative ideals and standard life events, which in turn, shapes their identity development (McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, an increasing recognition of sex and sexual attraction as "natural" and "necessary" (Kennon, 2021) may further enhance the invisibility and oppression of asexual individuals. For example, 'allonormativity', or the assumption that that all people experience some form of sexual attraction, has been shown to hinder the development and management of asexual identities (Mollet, 2020, 2021). Thus, there is a growing need to address and understand how an asexual identity is constructed within the context of both a heteronormative (Morgan, 2013) and allonormative society (Mollet, 2021).

3.2.6 *The Current Review*

For the purpose of the current review, asexual identity development will be conceptualised with reference to both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models. This will encompass components of identity development such identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different; discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities; and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others. Specifically, we will focus on empirical research that investigates identity

development at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, as well as the societal and cultural factors that influence identity development.

This scoping review will bring together research which pertains to asexual identity development and internalisation, with an added focus on whether and how individuals internalise societal messages held towards their asexual identity. Moreover, this review will provide an insight into how individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and diverge from the dominant heterosexual culture and assumed developmental path develop their identities.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis of literature, the research questions directing this review are broad in nature and address the following topics:

- What empirical research, both published and unpublished, has been generated about the development of an asexual identity?
- What attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences specific to asexual individuals shape their self-concept and understanding of their asexual identity?
- What gaps are present within the literature and what is recommended for future progression within this area?

This investigation acts as a significant contribution to our understanding of the key concepts and common experiences underlying the internalisation and development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as the first literature review of its kind, it maps research designs and analytical procedures to direct future research agendas.

3.3 Methodology

Literature reviews utilising a scoping methodology are becoming increasingly prevalent (Moher et al., 2009), highlighting their success and capacity to

bring together the research within an area. While there is currently no conclusive definition for a scoping review (Daudt et al., 2013), its main purpose is to provide an overview of a topic (Moher et al., 2015) through the syntheses of available grey and published literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review that is well executed, may make a substantial contribution to an area of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and is considered a rigorous form of literature review.

The broad nature of a scoping review allows for a more generalised research question and subsequent exploration of a wide range of associated literature (Moher et al., 2015). Therefore, this scoping review will allow for the inclusion of all relevant material without the limitations of specific methodological approaches or contexts, whether geographical, cultural or sex based. Moreover, scoping reviews endeavour to articulate what is currently known in an area, including in-depth investigation of key concepts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This is particularly fitting considering our limited understanding of asexual identity development and the way in which asexual individuals internalise their divergence from expected life events and societal norms. This scoping review will include studies that use varying methodologies and analytical approaches to consider what may be deemed a successful research design when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Furthermore, scoping reviews aim to present evidence relevant to a topic irrespective of study quality (Tricco et al., 2016) and are considered useful when mapping an area of research that is novel and emerging. Finally, as scoping reviews present information though mainly narrative presentations (Peterson et al., 2017), this will enhance reporting of the area under investigation, which is mainly qualitative or mixed in design, with limited statistical information. This scoping

review will grant the exploration of a breadth of literature, mapping evidence in an assessable and unrestricted way to inform future research (Tricco et al., 2016).

Although relatively novel in nature, investigation surrounding asexuality has developed considerably over the past few decades and can be considered an emerging area of research. Specifically, research has focused on how individuals come to identify as asexual, navigate relationships and disclosure, seek support and integrate within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016). This growth in research poses many theoretical and methodological challenges when studying the development of an asexual identity, such as inconsistent definitions, limited demographic information and restricted gathering of participants through asexuality-specific communities (Mollet, 2020). Thus, this review aims to map the diversity of research questions, methodologies, analytical approaches and theoretical orientations, to identify key concepts and knowledge gaps surrounding the development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as this research aims to extract and synthesise evidence surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation, the participants identified within each included study should maintain some understanding of themselves as asexual. Studies which include participants that do not engage in sexual activity (e.g., members of religious sects) and do not identify as asexual, will not be included for review.

3.4 Method

3.4.1 *Objectives and Research Question*

The objective of this scoping review is to provide an insight into the attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences that shape the identity development of asexual individuals, as well as how they internalise societal messages held towards

asexuality. This will involve review of both quantitative and qualitative evidence, which will direct the scope of future enquiry into the area of asexuality. Review questions included within this research take inspiration from the review title and as such, advise the formation of inclusion criteria (Khalil et al., 2016).

3.4.2 *Identifying Relevant Studies:*

Context: The context of literature reviewed does not require a specific geographical location, nor specified cultural, racial or sex-based factors. The reviewed literature does not require a specific setting nor discipline. This review is concerned solely with the factors that contribute towards asexual identity development and internalisation.

Types of Participants: Studies which gather data from asexual individuals have been included. When defining asexuality, studies which used self-identification as asexual, behaviours indicative of asexuality (a lack of sexual behaviour) and those which defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others were considered appropriate to include. However, regardless of how each study defined asexuality, it was imperative that the participants included had an awareness of the self as asexual and interpreted their experiences through this lens. A specific romantic identity, age or gender category were not deemed factors requiring exclusion.

Types of Studies: Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were included if written in English and published after January 1st, 2000. This cut-off point was considered appropriate as empirical research into asexuality comes predominantly from after this date (Bogaert, 2004).

3.4.3 *Outcomes of this Review:*

This review maps literature surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation. Specifically, this review outlines the experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs common among asexuals, such as coming-out, reactions of others and how they make sense of their asexual identities. In addition to this, methodological frameworks for studying asexuality and suggestions for future methodological approaches are outlined. The findings of this scoping review will be useful in informing the design and implementation of proceeding studies in asexuality and specifically those which focus on identity development and internalisation.

3.4.4 *Search Procedure*

A librarian specialising in behavioural and social science literature advised on appropriate search strategies and identified relevant bibliographic databases. Specific databases were searched to increase the likelihood of obtaining all relevant studies that fall within the scope of this review. This consisted of the databases EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, MEDLINE, APA PsycArticles, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, APA PsycInfo), Taylor and Francis, PubMed and Springer. In addition to this, grey literature searches were conducted using multiple search engines and databases.

3.4.5 *Search Strategy*

This review consisted of an extensive database search with carefully selected search terms, followed by the application of strict inclusion/exclusion criteria. Papers were excluded from review if they did not concern an asexual population or did not focus upon the identity development or internalisation (i.e., attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences) of asexual individuals. Following multiple database searches, 29

papers were identified from which to extract and synthesise evidence. The inclusion/exclusion procedure was phased in several separate stages, including the identification of relevant articles, the screening of each article for inclusion or exclusion and an independent cross-check of included articles by authors. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of "asexuality" or "asexual", "beliefs", "attitudes", "experiences", "identity" and "value". This review of literature was conducted across multiple timelines to ensure that the most recently published articles in the area were included in the final analysis.

1st January 2000 – 1st May 2019: A total of 294 papers were imported to the citation manager EndNote to allow for appropriate organisation of papers and to assist in the removal of duplicates. Following an initial removal of duplicates, 277 papers remained – it is important to note that this process did not immediately remove all duplicates and thus, further removal of duplicates was carried out later in the screening of papers. Using a checklist created prior to the screening process, author (SK) and a trained research assistant (XS) screened the remaining papers to determine eligibility. Most papers were excluded based on their title/abstracts. Following initial screening, 129 references were removed. The most common reasons for removal included that papers (a) were not empirical or were purely theoretical in nature, (b) did not examine asexual identity development (e.g., presentation of purely demographic information), or (c) concerned members of other non-heterosexual communities without separate presentation of results pertaining to asexual participants. A second screening resulted in the removal of an additional 127 papers. These papers were removed as they did not investigate the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual identity development or

internalisation. Through a second removal of duplicates, five more papers were removed, resulting in a total of 16 papers included for extraction and review.

1st May 2019 – 31st March 2020: An additional review of literature was conducted with the same search terms and databases as the original search. Forty papers were imported to EndNote, with the removal of three duplicates. Upon initial screening of titles and abstracts, 32 papers were removed as they were not empirical in nature or did not examine the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual individuals. Following an additional screening, one more paper was removed for the reasons outlined above. This resulted in a total of four papers to be included in the data extraction process.

1st of January 2000 – 1st of July 2021: A final review of literature was carried out with the same databases as the original search. Search terms were expanded to include "asexuality" or "asexual" and "identity development" or "identity formation" or "identity construction". This yielded 356 papers. Following an initial screening, 328 papers were removed as they were either duplicated, did not meet inclusion criteria, or had already been reviewed in prior searches. The remaining 28 papers underwent content analysis carried out by authors MM and SK. Following content analysis, 17 papers were removed as 15 did not meet inclusion criteria and two were not available to the authors. This resulted in a total of 11 papers from this search to be included in the data extraction process.

3.4.6 *Data Extraction Process*

When combined, a total of 31 papers gathered from the database searches were included in the data extraction process. A data extraction spreadsheet was designed to gather all relevant information from the papers included for review. This

detailed author names, location and year of publication, the method of investigation and analysis, study design and sample characteristics (sample size, age, gender, relationship status). The major themes produced within each study were listed within this extraction process. All authors examined the documents and extracted information simultaneously. MM reviewed this process throughout. As this scoping review aims to garner information surrounding our current knowledge of asexual identity development and internalisation, the above categories were considered in a flexible manner. During the data extraction process, a further six papers were removed on the grounds that they did not explore the attitudes, values, experiences, or beliefs specific to the development of an asexual identity. This resulted in 25 empirical papers being included in this scoping review.

3.4.7 *Search Strategy: Grey Literature*

Several databases and search engines were utilised during the grey literature search. Unlike the database search, a specific timeline was not identified. SK conducted several trials to determine search-engines that were most appropriate to retrieve and rank results that aligned with this scoping review. This resulted in the use of search engines dedicated to web-based resources such Google Search, DuckDuckGo and Dogpile. The first 100 results retrieved from each search-engine were considered for review. Dissertations and theses were searched using Ethos by British Library, dart Europe E-Thesis Portal, and repositories such as OpenGrey, Oaister/Worldcat, Core and Base. Conference proceedings were obtained through Web of Science and Research Gate. Search strategies remained consistent across resources and were derived from terms used in the bibliographic search. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of

"asexuality" or "asexual", "beliefs", "attitudes", "experiences", "identity" and "value". There was a considerable overlap between resources and many results had already appeared in the bibliographic search. Dissertations, theses and conference proceedings were excluded from review if they did not concern components of asexual identity development and internalisation. Four articles were selected for data extraction.

3.4.8 *Methodological Quality*

As this scoping review is exploratory in nature with an overarching aim to provide further information on asexual identity development and internalisation, an assessment of methodological quality was not performed. This allowed for the inclusion of all available literature in the area. Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews do not necessarily assess the quality of literature (Khalil et al., 2016).

3.4.9 *Analysing the data*

Results were reviewed by authors SK and MM. The research team identified, coded and charted relevant units of text from the articles as outlined by (Tricco et al., 2016) with a focus on findings that pertained to elements of asexual identity development and/or internalisation.

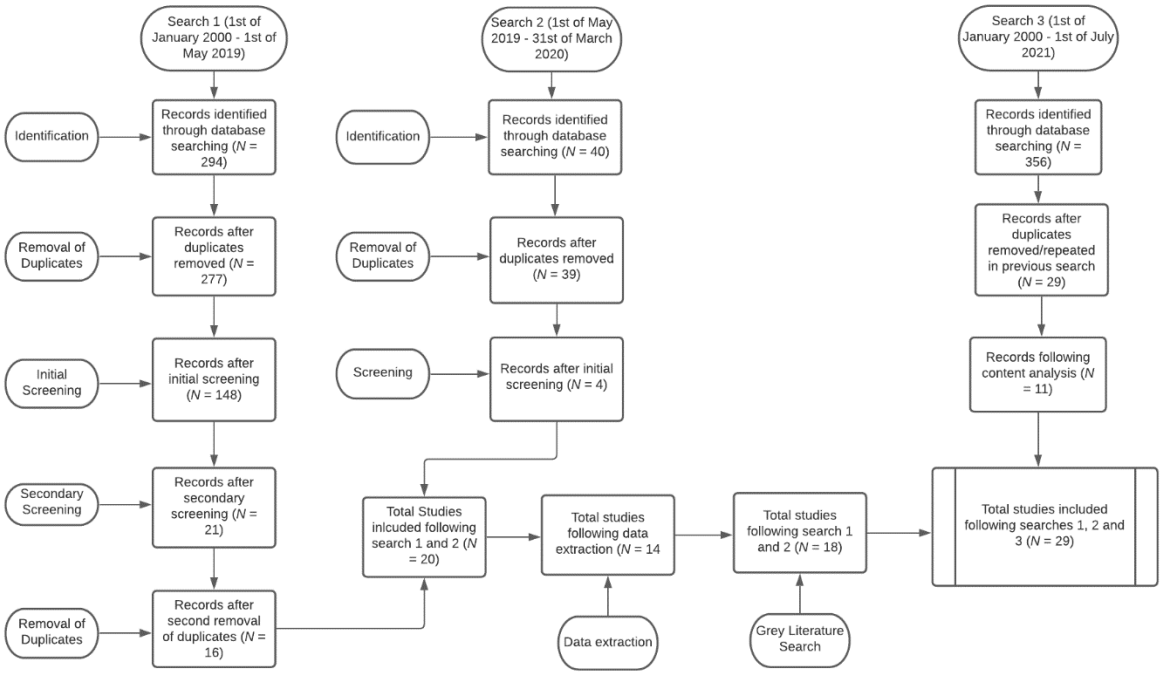


Figure 3.1 Flow diagram illustrating literature search and selection.

3.5 Results

A total of twenty-nine articles were included for review. Key details from each article were charted and summarised to include author information, year of publication, sample information, study design and main findings (Appendix I). Although a variety of methodologies were utilised across studies, the majority were qualitative in design and analysis (*N* = 23), with some quantitative (*N* = 3) or mixed design (*N* = 3). Mixed-methods or quantitative studies performed mainly descriptive analyses of the attitudes and characteristics associated with an asexual population and charted demographic information. The method of analysis implemented across qualitative studies were mainly phenomenological, grounded theory and ethnographic. The most common rationale given for this choice of qualitative methodology was a desire to examine asexual individuals' personal perceptions of an event or experience. The prevalence of this choice of methodology coincides with

the overarching aim of this scoping review which is also concerned with the accounts or sense-making processes of asexual individuals. Articles were produced predominantly within Western societies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. When identifying asexual participants within research, most studies (N = 27) used self-identification as an operational definition for asexuality. Several studies maintained the assumption that when recruiting through resources such as AVEN, participants should understand asexuality as 'a lack of sexual desire/attraction' and therefore, participants who self-identified as asexual were included in the research. One study used the "Asexual Identification Scale" (AIS) when recruiting participants and another used a combination of self-identification as asexual and participant description of asexuality as "not experiencing sexual attraction". As most studies utilised self-identification as a definition for asexuality, a comparison of findings based on differing definitions for asexuality was not possible.

When analysed thematically, eight themes were generated to represent key findings across literature. These themes were identified as the following:

- Understanding Asexuality
- Coming to an Asexual Identity
- Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
- Isolation and Invisibility
- Disclosure
- Individual Differences
- Negotiating Relationships
- Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion

3.5.1 *Understanding Asexuality*

Existing literature emphasises how asexuality is understood by asexuals and the implications that this may have when making sense of an asexual identity. Research suggests that asexuals understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often discovered through engagement with asexual communities and online forums.

Asexuality is understood predominantly within the asexual community as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Andersson, 2010; Brotto et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2008). An example of this can be seen in research conducted by Brotto et al., (2010), in which asexual participants described alternative motives for relationships and non-sexual forms of attraction. Similarly, Maxwell (2017), found that while asexuality may be connected to multiple forms of attraction, such attractions are based upon non-sexual desires, predominantly romantic with a focus on intellectual intimacy. Further examples of this can be seen within research conducted by Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) and Van Houdenhove et al., (2015), in which asexual participants note their ability to consider others as 'aesthetically pleasing' without sexual attraction.

Moreover, evidence suggests that sex and romance are perceived as two very separate constructs of desire within the asexual community. For example, attitudes towards romance do not differ significantly between asexual and allosexual participants. An example of this is seen within Bulmer and Izuma's (2018) comparison of asexual and allosexual participants' attitudes towards sex and romance. This research shows that while asexual participants typically display more negative attitudes towards sex, they do not differ significantly from allosexuals in

terms of their implicit attitudes towards romance. Similarly, research suggests that asexual women are more open towards romance and romantic attraction without an element of sexual desire (Foster et al., 2019). This understanding of romantic and sexual desire as different is seen throughout the literature and appears key in forming participants' understanding of their asexual identities.

Finally, imperative to understanding one's asexuality is a sense of community gained when identifying as asexual. Research suggests that a sense of difference associated with discovering an asexual identity may be subdued by the concept of an asexual community or asexuality-specific support groups (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). For example, a shared sense of community and exposure to others' accounts of asexuality has been shown to allow participants to move beyond individualised self-questioning and assists in the understanding of their asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

3.5.2 *Coming to an Asexual Identity*

Much of the literature emphasises components of coming to an asexual identity, including an awareness of the self as different and feelings of otherness within a sexualised society. For example, feelings of disparity when comparing the self with peers, is a common experience among asexuals, and for many, marks the beginning of their asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019). Moreover, this sense of difference may result in feelings of otherness and self-questioning among asexuals (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and may initiate the process of discovering an asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011). However, research suggests that coming to an asexual

identity may be a nuanced or "fluid" process, that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). For example, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021) have been shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual. Moreover, within their proposed model of asexual identity development, Robbins et al., (2016), acknowledge that awareness of one's asexual identity does not follow a linear progression and is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities.

The internet appears to play a large role when discovering and making sense of an asexual identity. For example, the internet and social media outlets act as a source of information among asexuals (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019) and have been shown to assist in the validation of an asexual experience as well as the coming out process (Robbins et al., 2016). Specifically, asexual participants have identified AVEN as a particularly useful source of information, both for their own validation, as well as a source of reference for friends and family members (Robbins et al., 2016).

Imperative to coming to an asexual identity is the ability to embrace one's sexuality and to adopt this as part of the self. Current literature conveys a sense of "embracing" asexuality upon discovering its existence (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, literature suggests a sense of "relief" when learning about asexuality and adopting an asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021).

3.5.3 *Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate*

Stigmatisation and the dismissal of asexuality is witnessed throughout literature. This stigmatisation appears to be a typical experience among participants and is considered by many to stem from the imposition of sexuality within society. These experiences of stigmatisation and a general lack of information surrounding asexuality brings forth a sense of obligation to educate others on asexuality.

Foster et al., (2019) reported the social rejection of participants' asexuality through allosexuals' assumptions that their lack of sexual interest is due to mental illness or childhood trauma. Such findings have been reproduced across literature, whereby asexuality lacks credibility within sexualised cultures (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016), and asexuals are often advised to seek medical or psychological explanations/treatments for their lack of sexual desire (Gupta, 2017). Participants have described others' consideration of asexuality as a "phase" (Carrigan, 2011) "mental or medical condition", or as a result of an abusive relationship (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). These experiences of stigmatisation appear to stem from a lack of information and the imposition of sexuality by society (Foster et al., 2019). Moreover, the presence of microaggressions and divergence from sexual and romantic expectations has brought many asexuals to experience "shame" surrounding their lack of sexual attraction (Deutsch, 2018; Vares, 2021, p. 7) and a sense of the self as different or incomplete (Savage, 2019). For example, many asexual participants have been shown to adopt a negative understanding of asexuality and attribute their lack of sexual attraction to conditions such as Asperger's Syndrome and problematic childhood experiences (Andersson, 2010). Again, these findings are considered to evolve as a negative

result of “compulsory sexuality” in which being sexual, irrespective of sexual identity, is favoured over ‘non-sexualness’ or asexuality (Gupta, 2015). According to the reviewed literature, the sources of this stigma may include family, friends, religious institutions and medical professionals, some members of non-heterosexual communities and the sexualisation of media and advertising (Deutsch, 2018; Gupta, 2017; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019).

Research suggests that experiences of stigmatisation has led to a “strong desire among asexuals” to educate others on the existence of asexuality (Brotto et al., 2010). This sense of obligation to inform others about asexuality stems from a need to destigmatise and address misconceptions (Brotto et al., 2010; Savage, 2019), increase visibility (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017) and legitimise asexuality (Scherrer, 2008). Findings from Gupta (2017), indicate a motivation for political/social change stemming predominantly from experiences of marginalisation and subsequent engagement in outreach activities and visibility work. This was also seen within research conducted by Mollet (2020, 2021), in which many asexuals considered their roles in volunteer efforts and educational initiatives as a responsibility and felt compelled to enhance information surrounding asexuality. Moreover, many asexuals express the need for increased research surrounding asexuality, to enhance self-identification and legitimate sources of information (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate a common experience of stigmatisation that is resisted through a shared obligation to educate others and promote an awareness of asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity.

3.5.4 *Isolation and Invisibility*

Current literature suggests a common experience of invisibility and social isolation among asexual individuals. This invisibility of asexuality appears to stem predominantly from sexualised cultures and allonormativity. For example, Vares (2021, p. 7), reported that representations of the heteronormative ideal, such as "the happy family" are considered "inescapable" by some asexual participants, with limited offline contact and few groups available for support. Such findings appear consistent across literature, with many participants reporting a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of asexuality (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018). This consideration of asexuality as invisible appears as a source of "angst" for some individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518), making it harder for them to come out (Dawson et al., 2016). Moreover, allonormativity has been shown to influence asexual individuals' identity management in multiple ways and contributes towards invisibility, invalidity, and the erasure of asexuals (Mollet, 2021). When examining the role of allonormativity within higher education, Mollet (2020, 2021), found that many asexual participants internalised allonormative ideals and questioned their asexuality. This sense of doubt surrounding participants' asexual identities was reinforced by lack of exposure to asexuality and perpetuated a sense of isolation (Mollet, 2020). Moreover, this sense of isolation and invisibility is reinforced by the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication of sexual relationships as 'normal' (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). Interestingly, while participants attributed this social anonymity to a lack of awareness of asexuality,

some also considered this as a result of disguising their asexuality (Mollet, 2020, 2021) or the ability to "fake being sexual" (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518).

3.5.5 *Disclosure*

According to current literature, there are several factors influencing an individual's willingness to disclose their asexual identity. Such factors range from a desire to increase awareness of asexuality, to apprehension surrounding a fear of dismissal and alienation. Moreover, research suggests that reactions towards participants' disclosure is related to others' awareness of asexuality.

Findings from Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) reveal that while selective in the disclosure of their asexual identities, participants felt that coming-out was necessary to increase awareness of asexuality. Research suggests that many asexual individuals consider disclosure as "necessary" to increase visibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019, p. 132; Robbins et al., 2016), and for some, is an opportunity to no longer hide their lack of sexual attraction (Rossi, 2017). Despite this, evidence suggests that coming out is a selective process within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016), with many asexuals considering disclosure as "unnecessary irrespective of circumstances" (Mollet, 2021). For example, Robbins et al., (2016) found that some asexual participants engaged in an internal process of identity acceptance and felt that coming out was not salient to their identities. Moreover, they noted that many participants considered disclosure as relevant only within romantic relationships or when addressing questions surrounding dating and finding a partner (Robbins et al., 2016).

Research suggests that many asexuals fear disclosure due to invisibility and denial within sexualised cultures (Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). This

apprehensiveness surrounding disclosure reportedly stems from a fear of stigmatisation (Robbins et al., 2016) and invisibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). For example, dismissal, expected or experienced, from friends, family and potential partners (Sloan, 2015; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2018), as well as others' assumption of sexual pathology, has been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). According to Mollet (2020), this denial or 'erasure' of asexuality perpetuates invisibility and contributes towards asexual individuals' beliefs that others are unwilling to accept or recognise their asexual identities. Moreover, many asexual participants have recalled experiences of erasure when disclosing their asexual identities to members of non-heterosexual communities and associated organisations (Mollet, 2020, 2021; Savage, 2019). Again, this dismissal appears to stem from allonormativity and negative assumptions held by some members of non-heterosexual communities and has caused many asexual individuals to refrain from sharing their identities within these spaces (Mollet, 2021).

Despite these concerns surrounding disclosure, support and acceptance from others is also seen throughout the reviewed literature. Findings from Robbins et al., (2016) indicated positive reactions towards disclosure that were related to an increased understanding and awareness of asexuality. Moreover, despite the existence of fear surrounding disclosure, Rothblum et al., (2020) reported an availability of social support that did not differ significantly from the experiences of other sexual minorities. Such experiences of support and understanding are also seen in research conducted by Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019), in which some participants report acceptance and understanding when coming out to family and friends.

3.5.6 *Individual Differences*

While the asexual community holds many commonalities, research suggests that there are a diverse range of attitudes and sub-identities that act to distinguish asexual individuals. This can be seen through the presence of both romantic and aromantic identities, varying attitudes towards sex and relationships, and differing sentiments regarding the significance of asexuality to one's self-concept. An example of such diversity can be seen within research conducted by Carrigan (2011) and Rossi (2017), in which participants presented varying attitudes towards sex, such as 'sex positive', 'sex-neutral', 'sex-averse' and 'anti-sex'. Additionally, research indicates the presence of 'demi-sexuals', whereby participants experience sexual attraction based on romantic desire (Carrigan, 2011), or intermittent sexual attraction while still identifying as asexual (Foster et al., 2019).

Romantic and aromantic identities are also shown to exist within the asexual community (Bulmer & Izuma, 2018; Scherrer, 2008). Distinctions between the two typically appear when describing an "ideal relationship", with aromantic asexuals often considering this as "friendship like" and romantic asexuals describing some level of physical intimacy and a preference for monogamy (Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008, p. 623). Moreover, when investigating sexual attraction and behaviour among asexual individuals, McInroy et al., (2020) found that over half of self-identified asexual participants (N = 711) had experienced some form of sexual and/or romantic attraction. This corresponds with the concept that asexuality is diverse, with varying levels of attraction and differing experiences of sexual and romantic relationships. The presence of diverse sexual and romantic identities has previously been interpreted through the 'split attraction model' (SAM), whereby sexual and romantic

attraction are considered separate constructs that can occur independently of one another (Przybyło, 2022). This model, which encompasses additional forms of attraction such as aesthetic, sensual, platonic, emotional and intellectual attraction, has been considered useful when understanding the nuances that underlie asexual and (a)romantic identities (Carroll, 2020; Przybyło, 2022; Winer et al., 2022). Despite this, the SAM has recently received conjecture from some individuals within the asexual community, as many feel it conflates attraction and orientation models (Coyote, 2019a, 2019b). As such, it may be more appropriate to consider this model as a guide to understanding the distinctions that underly asexual identities and position it within broader terms such as 'differentiated attraction/orientation' (Sennkestra, 2020). This may remove the assumption that the SAM is a single coherent model that is unvarying across asexual communities and may grant greater flexibility and versatility in asexual individuals' use of labels when referring to their romantic and sexual identities.

The literature also indicates that asexual individuals differ in their experience of being asexual and the value that they place on their asexual identity. An example of this can be seen within research conducted by Dawson et al., (2016), where many participants described the coming out process as important, while others considered it socially unnecessary with no pragmatic purpose. Moreover, several participants recounted a "Eureka" moment when first discovering the term asexual, while others considered this euphoria as short lived and quickly moved on following discovery (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 16).

3.5.7 *Negotiating Relationships*

Existing research emphasises how asexual individuals negotiate and understand intimate relationships. This includes the negotiation of intimate boundaries, loyalties and partnerships; the motivations to engage in a relationship; and doubts surrounding the feasibility of an intimate relationship with an allosexual partner.

The process of negotiating sexual boundaries and the resulting arrangements held between asexuals and allosexual partners is documented across literature. This can be seen through asexual participants' willingness to engage in some form of sexual activity with an allosexual partner (Gupta, 2017; Haefner, 2011; Sloan, 2015), and consideration of sex as a compromise within relationships (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020). Interestingly, research suggests that BDSM communities allow some asexuals the opportunity to find partners and engage in intimate activities that do not rely on sexual desire (Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018; Winter-Gray & Hayfield, 2021). Moreover, many asexuals report engaging in open relationships to maintain partnerships with allosexuals (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), and consider infidelity as romantic rather than sexual engagement with others (Brotto et al., 2010). Despite this, research also suggests that some asexuals engage in consensual sex due to societal pressures (Gupta, 2017), feel unable to communicate their asexuality or come to an agreement with their partners (Dawson et al., 2019; Savage, 2019).

Asexual participants describe several motivations for engaging in relationships with both asexual and allosexual partners. These motivations appear to stem from a desire to gain intellectual intimacy (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et

al., 2015), achieve long-term monogamy and a traditional family structure (Vares, 2018, 2021), and for some, adhere to cultural expectations and gender role expressions (Foster et al., 2019). However, research also suggests a sense of doubt surrounding the perceived possibility of a relationship. For example, many asexuals question the practicality of a sexless relationship (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and describe an inactive approach to finding a partner due to these perceived difficulties (Maxwell, 2017; Vares, 2018, 2021). Moreover, many asexuals consider their chances of finding a partner as "low" and often dismiss non-sexual closeness in friendships due to a fear of "something more" (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 11-14). Interestingly, some asexuals considered a relationship with another asexual individual as unlikely due to a lack of accessibility (Vares, 2018).

3.5.8 *Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion*

The evidence that surrounds asexual participants' religious beliefs and conservative views is sparse and conflicting at times. Such discrepancies can be seen through varying reports of religiosity, as well as differing levels of conservative sexual beliefs across studies. For example, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) suggest that many asexuals use Catholic discourse to explain their asexuality, Brotto et al., (2010) and Rothblum et al., (2019), found a higher proportion of atheism within their samples. Moreover, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) found Catholicism to be a significant point of reference among asexuals, Brotto et al., (2010), found that asexuality was more often related to non-conformist ideals, as well as an objection to religious values. In addition to this, Carvalho et al., (2017), reported the presence of more sexually conservative beliefs among asexuals, although this is yet to be addressed within future research.

3.6 Discussion

This scoping review presents several important findings about the attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences that underpin asexual identity development, as well as the process of internalising societal messages held towards asexuality. An analysis of the available literature has generated a list of provisory themes that describe components of asexual identity development and provides a unique contribution to our current knowledge of asexuality. The themes identified within this review appear consistently throughout literature highlighting their relevance and importance when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Moreover, features of identity development presented within this research correspond with existing theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development. It must be noted that the themes presented within this research are not prescriptive of asexual identity development and do not account for the varied experiences, sub-identities or genders present within the asexual population.

3.6.1 *Theoretical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research*

The articles included in this review were mainly qualitative in design and produced largely descriptive accounts of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs that may shape asexual identity development and internalisation. The reoccurring use of qualitative methods within the reviewed literature corresponds with an overarching aim to gain insights into the thoughts and feelings of participants (Austin & Sutton, 2014), as well as current attempts to broaden our understanding of asexual identities and experiences associated with asexuality (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Moreover, summarising the available qualitative research grants an additional layer to the value

of this scoping review and may be used to inform the design and implementation of future quantitative enquiries.

Existing literature emphasises the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their lack of sexual attraction. Evidence suggests that asexual individuals typically understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often recognise their asexuality through exposure to asexual communities. Identification as asexual appears to follow a common trajectory that is initiated through self-questioning and confirmed through online supports such as AVEN. Moreover, these findings are indicative of the term asexuality as hidden and not commonly recognised prior to exposure to online resources. The literature also presents a common experience of stigmatisation and social dismissal of one's sexual identity. This fear of dismissal and a lack of awareness from others appears to impact participants' willingness to disclose their asexual identities and reinforces a desire to educate others and increase awareness of asexuality. Finally, the literature suggests alternative motivations to engage in romantic relationships, as well as asexual individuals' concerns that underly intimacy and loyalties within partnerships. Despite such commonalities, research also presents a diverse range of attitudes and identities present within the asexual community. This is witnessed through the existence of diverse romantic (e.g., aromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic and homoromantic) and sexual (e.g., asexual, demi-sexual and gray-asexual) identities, as well as varying levels of significance placed on one's asexual identity. Moreover, there was a diverse range of ages and genders (e.g., male, female, transgender, agender and genderqueer) reported within the reviewed literature.

3.6.2 *The Role of Heteronormativity and Compulsory Sexuality*

Heteronormativity and ‘compulsory sexuality’ appeared as key concepts underpinning the research area of asexuality and specifically, literature surrounding the experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values of asexual individuals. Heteronormativity can be considered to relate to the promotion of heterosexuality as a societally preferred sexual identity, whereas compulsory sexuality pertains to “the common assumption that everyone is defined by some type of sexual attraction” (Emens, 2014, p. 303). Although the influence of these concepts was seen predominantly within literature investigating asexual individuals’ experiences of stigmatisation, isolation and invisibility, they were evident throughout all themes listed within this scoping review. Moreover, there appeared to be consistent evidence for allosexuals’ negative sentiments held towards asexuality and the impact that this has on asexual individuals’ identity development and internalisation.

Throughout the reviewed literature, there was repeated reference to allosexuals’ dismissal of asexuality as some form of physical or psychological disorder. This is consistent with the values of heteronormativity (Robertson, 2014) and allonormativity and thus, may lead to more a distressing sexual questioning process (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020). The influence of these heteronormative and allonormative ideals was apparent within literature through feelings of stigmatisation and alienation and appeared to instil a negative understanding of asexuality among some asexual participants. Isolation and ‘erasure’ also appeared as recurring sentiments throughout literature, as asexual individuals reported a sense of difference from their peers (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). Moreover, a common experience of invisibility reported within the

literature corresponds with the pressures of compulsory sexuality and how this may hinder the recognition of an asexual identity among asexual individuals (Winer et al., 2022). It was apparent that many participants internalised this sense of difference surrounding their asexuality and as a result, were seen to doubt or question their asexual identities. This is reminiscent of past literature surrounding the influence of heteronormativity and how this may exclude and marginalise non-heterosexual individuals (Rich, 1980). Moreover, these findings may be likened to research surrounding other sexual minority identities in which isolation and a sense of difference may lead to a greater risk for psychological damage (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). Future research should consider the impact that stigmatisation, isolation and dismissal may have on asexual individuals' wellbeing, granting greater insight into the problems that they may face when coming to an asexual identity. It is apparent that the imposition of sexual norms within society may negatively impact asexual individuals' cohesive sense of identity (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015) and thus, further investigation is required to better understand asexual individuals' experiences of overcoming both heteronormative and allonormative ideals (Winer et al., 2022). While there is much evidence surrounding asexuals' experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation, the impact of minority stress and the influence that this may have on their well-being is yet to be comprehensively investigated. According to Friedman (1999), stigmatisation and prejudice directed at a minority group can result in a stressful environment that may lead to physical and/or mental health problems. Interestingly, this minority stress can be linked to concealment of sexual identity (Meyer, 2003) and has been shown to have far-reaching health implications for lesbian and gay people (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). As this scoping review has identified reports of stigmatisation within the asexual population, future

research should consider how this is internalised by asexuals and the implications that this may have on their wellbeing. This may grant insight into the challenges faced by asexuals, as well as the resources available to counter stigmatisation and prejudice.

3.6.3 *Asexual Identity Development*

The themes present within this scoping review relate closely to stages of non-heterosexual identity development (Cass, 1979) and elements specific to asexual identity development (Robbins et al., 2016). Throughout literature, there is consistent evidence of how asexual individuals come to discover, understand and identify with asexuality, as well as the processes surrounding the disclosure of their asexual identity. Cass's (1979) initial stages of 'Identity Confusion' and 'Identity Comparison' are evident within the literature as a consideration of the self as different from peers marks the beginning of an individual's asexual identity. Moreover, repeated reports of self-questioning, pathologising and subsequent searching is consistent with the components unique to asexual identity development. The third and fourth stages of Cass's model, 'Identity Acceptance' and 'Identity Pride', are seen within the literature through varying reports of asexual individuals' embracing their asexuality and gaining a sense of asexual community. Specifically, online resources and asexual communities are shown to assist in the development of an asexual identity and correspond with current understanding of asexual identity development. According to Harper et al., (2016), online communities assist in developing non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe space of recognition and self-acceptance. As seen throughout the reviewed literature, these online spaces allow asexual individuals to develop their sense of identity within a larger

community. Moreover, the asexual community acts to ameliorate feelings of marginalisation and isolation deriving from heteronormativity and allonormativity, which as a result fosters a positive self-concept and identity among asexual individuals. Finally, disclosure of an asexual identity and a need to educate others on asexuality appears repeatedly throughout literature, further highlighting its applicability within the development of an asexual identity.

Despite the relevance of themes presented within this scoping review to the stages identified within non-heterosexual identity development models, there are several instances which portray asexual identity development as a non-linear process. For example, much of the literature suggests that developing and maintaining an asexual identity may be a nuanced or fluid process that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016). This is seen within the literature as visibility, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies are shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021). As a result, findings from this scoping review confirm a growing awareness of the multifaceted nature of asexual identity development (Winer et al., 2022).

Further research is required to establish the process of asexual identity development, as well as the factors contributing to how asexual individuals internalise their lack of sexual attraction. This may include investigation into the multifaceted nature of asexual identities and how they interact to shape asexual identity development. Moreover, future research should consider how asexual identity development coincides with and differs from that of other sexual minority identities. This will provide greater insight into the unique attitudes, beliefs, values

and experiences that contribute towards asexual identity development. Finally, as many asexual individuals report discoveries through online forums, future research should investigate the influence of online support and its role in amending this sense of difference.

3.6.4 *Relationships and Theories of Love*

When considering asexual individuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, much of the literature indicates a desire to gain intellectual or emotional intimacy without sexual desire (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021). These findings may be interpreted through Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, whereby love comprises of three independent components namely, 'intimacy', 'passion' and 'decision/commitment'. According to Sternberg (1986, 1997), these components are motivational needs that are present in varying degrees within relationships and can combine to form varying 'love styles'. Of relevance are the parts intimacy' and 'commitment' in which Sternberg (1986) theorised that an individual can experience closeness, connectedness and bondedness towards a partner without the presence of 'passion' or what is interpreted as sexual desire. This notion that intimate emotions can be felt without sexual desire, may tie in with asexuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, while also providing a useful framework for better understanding their experiences within these relationships. As such, the findings present within this review may act as an argument for the Sternberg model in that different forms of love are possible such as commitment and intimacy without the presence of sexual desire.

Moreover, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity also appear as factors contributing to asexual individuals' desire to engage in a partner relationship. Although asexuals' experience of sex is investigated within the current literature, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity is yet to be expanded upon. While this review does identify the influence of societal pressures (Gupta, 2017) and a desire to maintain relationships (Foster et al., 2019), there is a need to further investigate asexuals' reasons for having sex and the implications that this may have on their understanding of their asexual identity. Thus, future research should examine the presence of these emotion-based incentives and how they may align with Sternberg's model of love.

3.6.5 *The Asexual Community as Heterogeneous*

Studies typically reported a diverse range of ages, romantic orientations and genders within their participant pools. This reinforces an awareness of the asexual community as heterogeneous (Brotto & Yule, 2017), and corresponds with previous findings surrounding its widespread diversity (Weis et al., 2017). Moreover, this demonstrates the diverse nature of asexual identity development and how the integration of gender and sexuality within a heteronormative society may account for variability within asexual individuals' experiences (Cuthbert, 2019). This is seen within the reviewed literature as participants' departure from societally expected gender roles and sexual norms threatened their positive self-perceptions and subsequent identity development (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Moreover, gender appears to play a fundamental role within asexual individuals' experiences of dating and relationships, as well as allosexuals' reactions towards the disclosure of their asexual identities. For example, female asexuals' lack of sexual attraction may be

dismissed as sexual passivity (Vares, 2018) with some allosexuals considering them to 'tease' or 'lead on' their partners (Haefner, 2011). Conversely, sexual desire is considered inherent to male participants' gender identity, with some allosexuals disbelieving their lack of sexual drive and questioning their masculinity (Vares, 2018). Thus, the employment of heteronormative feminine and masculine sexuality, as well as allonormativity, may contribute towards the denial of asexual individuals' lack of sexual attraction in ways that are specific to their preferred gender identity.

Considering the diverse nature of the asexual community, future research should examine the influence of varying sub-identities on asexual identity development. This may include the intersection of queer identities (e.g., transgender and gender non-conforming people) and asexuality, as well as the role of racism, sexism and ableism within asexual identity development (Foster et al., 2019). This may allow greater inclusivity within research and grant insight into the complexity of asexual participants' experiences (Antonsen et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019).

3.6.6 *Limitations*

The generalisability of themes produced within this review is limited due to the nature of the participant pools involved. As most studies gained participants through online communities and asexuality specific platforms, this may not represent the experiences of asexuals who are not exposed to online forums. Thus, this brings forth the need to investigate the identity development and internalisation of asexual individuals that are not recruited through asexuality specific platforms or communities.

Moreover, there were several limitations surrounding the methodology of this scoping review. Firstly, the search strategy excluded studies published in a language

other than English, leaving open the possibility of important national and/or cultural differences. Secondly, as scoping reviews do not require a quality assessment of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), our reporting of these results may be subjective in nature. Finally, as our understanding of asexuality and the language used to describe asexual identities continues to evolve, the search terms used within this study may have led to the exclusion of some published literature. This is particularly relevant to research published earlier within the area of asexuality.

Chapter 4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Supplementary Methodology

In the previous chapter, I presented several important findings surrounding the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation. Although themes outlined in this review are not a rigid invariant model of asexual identity development, several features appeared consistently throughout the literature and were indicative of a somewhat common trajectory. Moreover, components of asexual identity development reported in this review aligned closely with many features identified within other non-heterosexual identity development models.

An understanding of the asexual community as heterogenous brought me to consider the multifaceted nature of asexual identity development and the role of varying sub-identities within this process. Specifically, this encouraged me to examine identity development from a non-linear perspective and the factors contributing to how asexual individuals internalise their lack of sexual attraction. This included how romantic orientation and age contributes towards the denial of an individual's asexuality. Moreover, this brought me to consider the personal and societal factors that inform the development of an asexual identity, and how asexual individuals may attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards them.

In chapter five, I examine the accounts of five self-identified asexual women using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). As the first empirical study of my PhD thesis, this allowed me to identify components of asexual identity development and internalisation in the context of an allonormative and

heteronormative society, with an added focus on the intersection of romantic identities. Moreover, this study helped me to better understand the key concepts and experiences that underly the development of an asexual identity, as well as the attitudes, values and beliefs that shape asexual individuals' self-concepts.

A thorough description of the methodological considerations and processes of IPA are contained in the research article (chapter five). The purpose of this supplementary chapter is to provide extended information surrounding the philosophical underpinnings and research design of an IPA study that could not be included in the main article due to word count restrictions. This includes detailed discussion of research design, ethical considerations and data analysis. This is followed by a chapter summary and contribution to the overall thesis aims and objectives.

4.1 Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Several features of IPA led to its implementation as the analytical approach in this study. Namely, the phenomenological nature of IPA holds a philosophical underpinning which is concerned with the study and interpretation of lived experience and aligns with the overarching aims of this thesis. Moreover, as an approach to phenomenology, IPA adheres to commitment, rigour and pertinence when studying existential experience (Finlay, 2011; Pringle, 2011) while granting "more room for creativity and freedom" during write-up and analysis (Willig, 2001, p. 69). This allowed me to present participants' accounts in a way that was true to their experiences while maintaining the reliability and integrity of my findings. Moreover, as IPA focuses on the individual perspective, this allowed for a more in-

depth interpretation (Smith et al., 2009) and enabled a substantial exploration of asexual individuals' identity development and internalisation. Equally, as IPA may be used to contextualise research within a wider context (Pringle, 2011), this enhanced the applicability of my findings to the larger asexual population.

Epistemology

IPA examines an individual's recognition or awareness of an experience, where a certain life event is considered consciously by an individual and they form meaning from this (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). As this research focuses on how asexual individuals makes sense of their lives in relation to their orientation, I examined the reflections and meaning that they assign to their experiences. My analysis was informed by the three major areas of philosophy that underly IPA, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology

Husserl's approach to phenomenology involves the careful examination of human experience whereby the essential qualities of an experience may be depicted through an individual's account (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, Husserl contends that each element identified within an experience should be considered individually and not as a component of a larger pre-existing category that the researcher has 'constructed'. This theorising brings forth the phenomenological method of 'bracketing', an approach which I applied throughout the analytical phase of this research. This approach implies that we 'bracket', or put to one side, the taken-for-granted considerations of our world to develop meaningful perceptions of that world (Smith et al., 2009). To achieve this, I withheld expectations and hypotheses during my analysis (Hanneke et al., 2017) and attempted to complete a series of 'reductions'

that redirected any potential distractions or preconceived assumptions of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

I was, however, aware that this method of bracketing could not completely remove my sense of the world or the assumptions that I have surrounding asexuality. As theorised by both Heidegger and Gadamer, when performing close analysis of text and engaging in meaning-making, a researcher may unconsciously gain certain presumptions or preconceived understandings (Smith et al., 2009). This encouraged me to engage in 'reflexive bracketing', whereby I made a conscious effort to put aside any biases and alleviate potentially detrimental preconceptions that were harmful to the research process (Ahern, 1999; Tufford & Newman, 2012). This involved assessing my own interests as a researcher and motivations to complete this study, clarifying my own personal values surrounding gender and sexuality, and recognising any of my own reactions to participants' data that lacked objectivity. Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is our nature to consider ourselves as different from everything else in the world and maintain a holistic engagement with the world (Smith et al., 2009). For example, I was aware that my individual or 'situated perspective' within the research process may have guided my interpretation of participants' accounts. Therefore, I understood that while I could attempt to interpret participants' experiences of their world, I could never truly share that entire experience. This led me to consider the inherent restrictions surrounding my understanding of participants' accounts and recognise the limitations of my analysis and interpretation of the research findings.

Hermeneutics

As IPA is considered an interpretative endeavour (Smith et al., 2009), it is informed by a hermeneutic process. Hermeneutics is considered the science of

interpretation or meaning (Tuffour, 2017), where experience is entwined with meaning and language creates a source of projection for experience (Friesen et al., 2012). My analysis involved a double hermeneutic process in which I attempted to make sense of participants' sense-making. This allowed me to interpret the original expression or meaning in text and granted greater insight into the phenomenology present. Moreover, by engaging with the hermeneutic circle, I completed a cyclical analysis of the data that operated at several levels. This involved moving between words, sentences and complete text during my analysis and recording any preconceptions that may have influenced my interpretation (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Applying a double hermeneutic process when analysing participants' accounts encouraged me to continuously reflect on my interaction with the data and area under investigation. For example, while I consider myself an ally to the asexual community and advocate for the generation of knowledge surrounding asexuality, I was aware that this research was led largely from an outsider or 'etic' perspective. This brought me to consider the value of both 'insider' and 'outsider' research positions during my analysis, and the arguments surrounding their contribution to the research process. For example, many researchers suggest that an outsider position in research holds several advantages (Hellawell, 2006; LaSala, 2003) such as the ability to make observations from the data by asking naive or relatively open questions. This can result in a more in-depth exploration of a topic, as well as the observation of features in the data that appear obvious or are often over-looked by insiders (Hellawell, 2006). However, while the position of an outsider lends to objectivity and an open disposition when analysing results, there are also several limitations to this approach such as a limited understanding of the subject area. For example, as an outsider, I did not hold the same knowledge surrounding the experience of being

asexual and the implications that this may have in real-world settings. Moreover, the familiarity that the insider researcher has may be advantageous when developing research questions, formatting an interview schedule, accessing data and carrying out analyses (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

I acknowledge that my outsider position may have led to a shift in dynamics with participants as discussion revolved around learning within research rather than a sense of common ground or shared understanding. For example, I felt that my role as a researcher may have caused participants to doubt my ability to understand or relate to a topic of discussion. Although not explicitly stated by participants, this may have resulted in some wariness or conjecture held towards me and the nature of this study. This reflection is similar to that held by Hayfield & Huxley (2015), in which they noticed participants' tendency to view research as encroachment and thus were less likely to consider researchers as trustworthy in their motives.

Although this outsider status may have positioned me as just that, I ensured that steps were taken to combat any concerns associated with this. For example, I educated myself extensively through a review of literature as well as following discussions held on asexuality specific platforms. Moreover, during the analysis phase of this research, I kept a reflective journal in which I noted any preconceptions and assumptions both before, during and after each phase of analysis. As this was a substantial learning curve for me in terms of my own knowledge of asexuality and the lived experience of participants, I continued this reflexive journaling throughout the analysis phase and write-up.

Idiography

IPA is a unique form of qualitative enquiry in that it focuses on the idiographic element of research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While traditional

phenomenological approaches seek to make claims at a general level, IPA is concerned with individual experience and how this may converge and diverge across a sample of participants. This focus on individual accounts involved a detailed analysis of how an experience has been understood from the perspective of a particular person within a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, this idiographic form of analysis allowed me to explore each participants' case individually and following this, compare cases concurrently (Finlay, 2011).

4.2 Research Design

Sampling in IPA

To ensure relevance and personal significance to the population under investigation, IPA researchers conduct their studies using relatively homogenous samples (Noon, 2018). Despite this, it is recommended that the specificity of the sample is relative to the phenomena under investigation (Smith et al., 2009) and thus, the criteria for participant inclusion/exclusion may vary across studies. In the context of this study, participants were only required to identify as asexual. No further sample characteristics such as age, sex, social/demographic status, or romantic orientation were included as criteria. Although gender was not considered a criterion for exclusion, all participants who responded to the research call identified as female. While I am aware that male or non-binary participants may have provided extended insight into the gendered experiences of asexuality, this sample allowed for the examination of romantic orientation within asexual identity development and tallied much of the literature surrounding the implications of normative feminine sexuality and the assumption that women are less sexual and/or less aware of their own sexual desires than men. Moreover, the relatively similar accounts of

participants was indicative of data saturation and this ultimately led to my decision to cease data gathering.

When conducting IPA, participants are generally gained or contacted through various forms of gatekeepers (Smith et al., 2009). Having identified asexual people as the population under investigation, I invited members of the online AVEN community to participate in this research. This ensured that participants were at minimum, aware of asexuality and identified as asexual. To ensure that participants did indeed identify as asexual, they were asked to elaborate on their understanding of asexuality at the beginning of the interview.

The Interview Process

Each interview was conducted independently and lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. As the interviews were carried out through Skype, I took time at the beginning of each call to introduce myself, restate the aims of the interview and allow time for questions relating to the study. I then asked participants to verbally agree/disagree to participate in the research. During the interview, I engaged in active listening and withheld a reflective response to conversation and the accounts of participants. As is the nature of IPA, I allowed participants to lead the interview, describing in detail their experiences or beliefs that were important to them and promoting unexpected developments in the conversation. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, questions deviated between participants and topics of conversation followed suit. I promoted the discussion of topics that were unexpected or appeared to hold significant meaning to the participant. I recorded conversations using a dictaphone and noted any non-verbal behaviours or expressions by hand. Upon completing the interview, I thanked participants and allowed time for any

questions. I also provided my contact information and details of other forms of support provided within the asexual community.

4.3 Ethical Considerations: Taxonomy, Informed Consent and Participant Wellbeing

Ethical approval was received from the School of Applied Psychology's Ethics Committee and the AVEN Project Team. The methods undertaken in this research are in line with procedure identified by the Psychology Society of Ireland (2019). From the conceptualisation of this study to the dissemination of findings, I took several steps to ensure that I engaged appropriately and sensitively with participants. This involved adhering to guidelines developed by the AVEN project team, informing participants of the study design and educating myself in the taxonomy and classifications used in the asexual community.

Participants who took part in this study were 18 years or over and were required to complete written and/or verbal informed consent. I reminded participants of their right to withdraw from this study both before and after the interview and provided them with my contact details and information surrounding support groups. I assigned all participants pseudonyms to protect their identities and did not collect any identifiable information. All data was collected and processed in line with European Union legislation (GDPR) and the Irish Data Protection Act (2018). Extensive documentation and metadata were maintained alongside all interviews. This included blank questionnaires/consent forms, anonymised interview transcripts, coded transcripts, a reflective journal and evidence of theme formation. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, I did not share raw data.

As this research was conducted in conjunction with AVEN, I followed rules outlined by the AVEN project team and this in turn, reinforced all ethical considerations. For example, members of the project team approved the study description and call for participants prior to being posted on the AVEN discussion forum. They also checked a copy of the interview schedule to ensure that the language used was appropriate and did not contribute towards the denial or exclusion of certain members of the asexual community. As someone who does not identify as asexual, I took time to consider what an allyship with the asexual community may look like and what this might entail. This included the challenges that come with carrying out research with an emerging identity group and efforts to avoid assuming participants' sexual orientation or position in the asexual community. Moreover, I felt it was my duty to ensure that the most pressing issues for asexual individuals were considered throughout the research process and that I disseminated findings accordingly.

Developing an awareness of asexual self-reference categories and pronouns allowed me to engage appropriately with the taxonomies and classifications used by asexual individuals. This involved familiarising myself with commonly-used language and labels through interactions with online forums and performing a literature review. Although these measures extended the preparation time of the interview schedule and added complexity to the conduct of interviews, I considered participants' ability to self-identify as a fundamental right and endeavoured to respect their capacity for self-determination (Henrickson et al., 2020). Moreover, I felt that my attempts to use appropriate language dignified and enriched participants' research experiences and allowed them to fully disclose their romantic orientation and relationship status. This awareness of asexuality as a complex and multifaceted

identity shifted the burden of education away from participants and minimised potential distress. All participants reported that the interview was a positive experience for them and did not display significant levels of distress both before, during or after the interview. For example, participants described feeling at ease throughout the interview process and comfortable when discussing potentially sensitive topics. They also believed that the interview gave them the opportunity to share their experiences and empowered them to raise awareness of asexuality and inform others.

Throughout data analysis, manuscript write-up and dissemination, I took great care to not problematise participants' experiences and instead recognised their accounts as examples of resilience and resourcefulness. This in line with recommendations provided by Henrickson et al., (2020, p. 8), in which they acknowledge that "research plays an important role in advancing the interests of individuals, groups, communities, and societies, and not merely identifying problems". Moreover, conducting my research in this way minimised the erasure or denigration of asexual people (Brunning & McKeever, 2021).

4.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative enquiry takes on a heightened relevance in this research due to the exploratory nature of the area and lack of pre-existing data (Coyle & Lyons, 2021). As IPA aims to capture the meaning that participants assign to their experiences (Reid et al., 2005), this method provides a unique and previously unexplored insight into asexual identity development and internalisation. When analysing each individual interview, I engaged in a process of reading and re-reading, making comments, developing codes, and identifying and cataloguing

emergent themes. I then cross-examined themes to develop a hierarchy that best describe the combined experiences, attitudes and beliefs of participants. I present my analytic interpretations through a narrative account that is supported by verbatim extracts.

My supervisor played a valuable role throughout the analytical phase of this research. Regular supervision meetings granted credibility to my analysis and challenged the robustness and quality of the emerging codes and themes (Sandelowski, 1993; Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, this process of debriefing allowed me to explain the logic behind decisions made, maintain honesty and clarify my interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As mentioned previously, I maintained a journal detailing my reflective process and coding procedure to ensure consistency and transparency of findings (Long & Johnson, 2000).

Within-case Analysis

Employing a within-case approach to analysis granted an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study and allowed me to become immersed within each participants' account (Mills et al., 2010). This fostered the emergence of participant attributes that were unique to their romantic orientation and gender identity, and contextualised experiences specific to this. Moreover, this allowed me to later carry out a cross-case comparison to identify similarities and discrepancies among participants and identify patterns and themes that exist across cases (Mills et al., 2010). Findings are presented for each participant through a theme-within-case approach and followed by a discussion of experiences that are specific romantic orientation and gender identity. This supports the cyclical nature of IPA whereby I moved back and forth between individual and shared perspectives (Smith et al., 2009).

Transcribing

Interviews were transcribed within one to two days following each individual interview. This allowed me to immerse myself within each participant's account and record any initial impressions gained immediately after the interview. These reflections or post-interview memos were utilised throughout the analysis phase of each participant's account.

Developing Codes and Emergent Themes.

A document consisting of three columns was created for each interview. The interview transcript was allocated to the middle column, exploratory comments to the right column and initial codes to the left (Smith et al., 2009). When developing exploratory comments, I noted how the participant spoke about or understood a point of discussion, with a focus on semantic content and language. These initial comments were a mixture of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual in nature and remained close to the participant's explicit meaning (Smith et al., 2009). In the third or left column, I developed emergent themes whereby I attempted to reduce the volume of detail in my analysis while maintaining complexity (Smith et al., 2009). This process of coding and developing emergent themes required a substantial amount of time, approximately 20 hours per interview transcript. Each transcript resulted in 300 to 400 codes and approximately 20 to 25 emergent themes. Each emergent theme was then paired with a quote from the transcript and a line number so that the emergent theme could be easily traced to where it originated in the text. These exploratory notes were developed and added to through a process of reading and supervisor review.

Clustering Emergent Themes under Main Themes

This stage of analysis brought me to search for connections across emergent themes and group them together to form main themes. I then allocated labels that best described the concepts underlying each cluster. At this stage, some themes were removed from my analysis as I felt they did not contribute towards the emerging structure or were supported with limited evidence (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This was a particularly creative phase of analysis, as I organised and reorganised themes in several ways to layer my understanding of the theme and to push the quality of my analysis to a more advanced level. Once this process of clustering themes was completed, I created a document outlining the development and structure of each main theme. This document detailed my understanding of each theme and the thought process that led me to develop that theme. Each interpretation outlined in this document is accompanied with verbatim extracts to exemplify the participant's lived experience and how I made sense of this. To provide a graphic representation of this process, I created a map outlining the structure of themes for each interview.

Cross-Case Analysis

The ability to portray unique participant perspectives and shared experiences is key in IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In doing this, the researcher seeks to uncover patterns that emerge in the data, with which overarching themes can be developed. It is, however, essential that when conducting this phase of analysis, the researcher remains faithful to the participant's individual experience, while also illustrating more general themes (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

This final phase of analysis brought me to observe the structure of major themes and look for comparisons across interviews. To do this, I reviewed theme maps, and confirmed my observations through the comparison of verbatim extracts, memos and notes made throughout the interpretative process. I compiled a list of

major themes present across interviews and recorded the prevalence of each theme. In addition to this, I created a summary table of themes with illustrative quotations from each relevant interview. This process also allowed me to consider the "potency" of each theme and how a theme in one case may help to illuminate a theme in another (Smith et al., 2009). During this process, several themes were renamed or reconfigured to better portray their applicability across cases and to allow better comprehension within my analysis. Moreover, to grant greater transparency to this process, I documented all changes made to theme names and structure through hand-written notes kept during cross-case analysis.

Changing Terminology in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

In the most recent edition of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research,* Smith et al., (2021) outline modifications to terminology that better reflect the analytical work being produced during various stages of analysis. This includes a clearer delineation of the term "theme", with "Emergent Themes" now being referred to as "Experiential Statements". In addition to this, a collection of related experiential statements is now clustered to form a Personal Experiential Theme (PET). Although I did not implement this revised terminology during my write and analysis, I recognise it's preferability among IPA researchers and acknowledge it's use in more recent publications.

4.5 Chapter Summary

I first examine definitional issues surrounding asexuality and further outline asexual identity development within a heteronormative and allonormative society. I then account for the research design and provide a detailed breakdown of participant characteristics, data collection and recruitment procedures. This is followed by

research findings and my discussion of the five superordinate themes that were identified. Although I present findings in a theme-within-case manner, I later examine convergence and divergence across cases and provide a detailed discussion of this.

Consistent with themes outlined in my scoping review, the discovery of participants' asexual identities began through an awareness of themselves as different from their peers and was assisted by asexuality-specific communities. Moreover, all participants referred to the impact that heteronormativity and allonormativity has within society and how this hindered the development of a positive sense of identity and their willingness to come out. Despite the existence of a common trajectory among asexual women, there were several discrepancies across their individual accounts that were subject to romantic orientation. For example, participants desired different types of relationships depending on their romantic identity, with aromantic women seeking friendships and romantic identified women pursuing romantic relationships. Moreover, while some aromantic women considered coming out as irrelevant, romantic-identifying women considered this as an important step when pursuing potential relationships.

As the first empirical study in my thesis, this granted me a first-hand insight into the sense-making processes that surround asexual identities, as well as the lived experiences of asexual individuals. While the themes identified in this study corroborated features of identity development outlined within my scoping review, patterns of convergence and divergence across cases brought me to further consider the role of romantic orientation within identity development and inspired the next step in this research to compare the experiences of romantic and aromantic asexual people. Moreover, as this study focused on the identity development of asexual

women, this encouraged me to later consider how this may differ on the basis of gender.

Chapter 5 The Identity Development and Internalisation of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Study 2)

Sinéad Kelleher, University College Cork

Mike Murphy, University College Cork

This chapter is an exact copy of the journal paper referred to above.

5.1 Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the identity development and internalisation of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. Participants were recruited through the online community the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and included five women between the ages of 18 and 40. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Five themes emerged from the data: The Asexual Self, Discovering Asexuality, Disclosure, Navigating Relationships and Barriers to Asexuality. The development of an asexual identity was initiated through an awareness of the self as different within society and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community. Although all participants described a sense of pride surrounding their asexual identity, some participants at times attempted to minimize the importance of asexuality to their self-concepts. Social norms and the values of a heteronormative society influenced participants' abilities to accept their orientation, as well as their coming-out processes. There were notable discrepancies between

participants' accounts that were specific to their romantic orientation and age. The theoretical implications of each theme within the development of an asexual identity and internalization of an asexual orientation are discussed.

Keywords: Asexuality, Identity Development, Internalization, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Heteronormativity

5.2 Introduction

Research surrounding asexuality has increased considerably over the past several decades and is growing in profile (Catri, 2021; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). This may be due to the enhanced visibility of the orientation and community cohesion, as well as the need for research surrounding the experiences and issues of asexual individuals (Hammack et al., 2019). While there is currently no definitive conceptualization of asexuality within the literature, it is defined predominantly as either a unique sexual orientation or as a sexual identity (Catri, 2021). When considering asexuality as a sexual orientation, a proportion of the literature has attempted to define asexuality as an "enduring" lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364). This definition derives from both theoretical and empirical research surrounding the orientation and develops upon Storm's (1980) two-dimensional model of sexuality, in which asexuality encompasses individuals who score low on both heteroeroticism and homoeroticism. Moreover, this understanding of an asexual person as one who "does not experience sexual attraction" corresponds with the definition used by many members of the Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest online community for asexual individuals (Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network, 2018).

5.2.1 *Definitional Issues Surrounding Asexuality*

An understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others does not necessarily imply, therefore, a lack of sexual experience or of romantic attraction amongst asexuals (Bogaert, 2006, 2015). For example, research has shown that many asexual individuals are sexually active (Aicken et al., 2013; Brotto et al., 2010) and can hold varying attitudes towards sex such as sex-positive, sex-neutral, and sex-averse (Carrigan, 2011). Moreover, reduced sexual behavior, or a state of chastity may not be understood as a hallmark of asexuality, as individuals abstaining from sexual activity may not lack sexual desire nor understand the self as asexual (Bogaert, 2015). As mentioned previously, a lack of sexual desire does not necessarily constitute a lack of romantic attraction or affection directed towards others, with many asexual individuals identifying as heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic and so on (Bogaert, 2004; Hinderliter, 2009). To elaborate, sexual and romantic attraction are often recognized as separate, with romantic attraction deriving from feelings of "infatuation" and "emotional attachment" (Diamond, 2003, p. 174) and sexual attraction involving "a wish, need, or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities" (Regan & Berscheid, 1995, p. 346). Moreover, it is common within the asexual community to distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction on the basis of gender (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Scherrer, 2008). For example, some asexuals may report a capacity for romantic attraction irrespective of gender (i.e., biromantic) but experience some level of sexual attraction towards a specific gender (i.e., the opposite gender).

Using a definition that centers upon a lack of sexual desire directed towards other people does not mean that an asexual individual inherently lacks sexual desire.

On the contrary, much literature indicates the presence of sexual desire or a capacity for arousal amongst asexual individuals, although "solitary" in nature and not directed towards others (Bogaert, 2012, 2015, p. 364). Within the broader context of the asexual population, some individuals may experience varying levels of sexual attraction (i.e., graysexual) or develop sexual attraction towards another individual upon the presence of romantic attraction (i.e., demi-sexual) (Hammack et al., 2019). Thus, asexuality is believed to exist along a spectrum, with some individuals reporting fluctuating levels of sexual attraction and varying experiences surrounding sexual activity and romantic relationships (Hammack et al., 2019).

Conversely, a lack of sexual attraction does not necessarily imply that an individual identifies as asexual. While self-identification with a sexual orientation is considered "important from both developmental and sociocultural perspectives" (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364), there are many issues when defining an orientation purely in this way. This includes an inconsistent awareness of self-labels, hesitation towards coming out, fluctuating allegiances to a label, as well as political motivations (Bogaert, 2012). Thus, defining sexual orientation through self-identification or labels alone may impede the complex and multidimensional identity formation apparent amongst many sexual minority individuals (Diamond, 2003).

In the context of the current research, asexuality has been operationalized as when an individual identifies as asexual and describes experiencing no sexual attraction (Catri, 2021). Moreover, to remain sensitive to the complexities and nuances surrounding identification with an asexual orientation, participants were asked to describe what the term 'asexuality' *meant* to them. This granted an unbiased depiction of each participant's understanding of their asexuality and allowed an openness towards varying sexual behaviors, desires, labels and romantic attraction.

5.2.2 *Asexual Identity Development*

Identity can be understood as a "personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles" (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987; Morgan, 2013, p. 53) and may comprise of both individual and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). According to Savin-Williams (2011), sexual identity can be considered as both a cognitive and emotional understanding surrounding the significance of an individual's sexuality and may include sexual attraction, desire, behavior, values and relationships. Research is becoming increasingly interested in non-heterosexual individuals' understanding of their sexual orientation and the processes surrounding sexual identity development (Morgan, 2013).

Although the terms 'sexual orientation and 'sexual identity' are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished; sexual orientation may account for an individual's sexual predisposition, whereas sexual identity is referred to as an individual's recognition of their sexual orientation and "identification with such predispositions" (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Worthington et al., 2002, p. 497). Essentially, an individual's sexual identity may comprise of the label that they use to identify their sexual orientation both to themselves and to others, and is representative of their "sexual thoughts, behaviours, attractions and fantasies" (Gordon & Silva, 2015). Moreover, it is important to note that sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the label that an individual places on their sexuality do not always correspond perfectly (Glover et al., 2009), with many sexual minority individuals identifying with a sexual orientation that most closely aligns with their behaviors and experiences (Morgan, 2013). Because of this, it is plausible that some individuals'

awareness and understanding of their sexual identity and sexual experiences may change across their lifetime (Diamond, 2003; Morgan, 2013). Forming an understanding of one's sexual identity is an important process which first manifests during adolescence (Fivush & Zaman, 2015; Morgan, 2013) and can continue across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Although previous models of non-heterosexual identity development tended to focus on stages or 'milestones' that occur in a sequential order (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), more recent models conceptualize identity development in a multidimensional manner, with a consideration of intersecting identities (e.g., race and gender). For example, the Non-Sequential Task Model of bi/pan/polysexual identity development (Harper & Swanson, 2019), demonstrates the complexities of individual experiences and identities, and attends to processes of identity development that do not occur within a particular order. Similarly, the Interpretative Sexual Landscape Model of sexual identity (Gordon & Silva, 2015), illustrates individual perspectives of identity development and how interactions with others may impact the interpretation of an individual's sexual identity. Interestingly, research suggests that there are many elements specific to the development of an asexual identity that are not witnessed within other non-heterosexual theoretical models (McInroy et al., 2020). Within their proposed model of asexual identity development, Robbins et al., (2016) identified experiences common among asexuals, including: an absence of social information surrounding asexuality, the role of the internet within the discovery and disclosure of asexuality, as well as a desire to educate others and promote awareness of asexuality. Most notably, Van Houdenhove et al., (2015, p. 262), reported that for many asexuals the development of an asexual identity includes several stages such as

"coming to an (a)sexual identity, experiencing physical intimacy and sexuality, and experiencing love and relationships".

As mentioned previously, experiences associated with an individual's sexual orientation may be subject to other dimensions of identity such as gender roles and expressions within society (Warner & Shields, 2013). For example, while asexual women have been shown to experience greater level of acceptance due to societally expected 'female sexual passivity' (Gupta, 2019; Vares, 2018), they are often subject to greater levels of sexual coercion and are typically less able to refuse unwanted sexual activity (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Gupta, 2019). Conversely an assumption of male sexual desire as inherent may cause many asexual men to experience disbelief and denial of their asexuality (Vares, 2018). This multi-dimensional understanding of sexual identity and sexual orientation has gained prominence within the study of sexual identity and poses many implications for current models of sexual identity development.

5.2.3 *Asexual Identity Development and Heteronormativity*

According to Thoits (1999), the development of an individual's sexual identity is influenced by cultural and societal factors and can account for varying levels of well-being. Identity development within the context of a heteronormative society presents many legal and structural barriers for non-heterosexual individuals (Morgan, 2013) and may lead to higher levels of discrimination and victimization. Specifically, classification as part of a non-heterosexual minority can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation, and stigmatisation (Mayer et al., 2014) and this in turn, can negatively affect the development of a non-heterosexual identity.

The societal subjugation of asexual individuals due to their deviation from heteronormativity may be understood through Minority Stress Theory, whereby sexual minorities experience "persistent, excessive stress as a result of their minority status in a heterosexist society" (McInroy et al., 2020, p. 1). This theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding sources of mental health difficulties among sexual minorities, including stressful social environments, stigma and prejudice (Meyer, 2003). Although not studied extensively within the area of asexuality, features typical of minority stress theory are witnessed throughout literature. For example, research has shown a markedly higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with the asexual orientation, with many attributing this to discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Borgogna et al., 2019; Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). According to Chasin, (2015), negative sentiments held towards the orientation, as well as a lack of acceptance from friends, family and professional misunderstandings, appear detrimental to asexual individuals' self-concept and identity development. Negative sentiments such as a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of the asexual orientation (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2020; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018), as well as an assumption of sexual pathology, have been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships, has led to increased isolation witnessed within the asexual population (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021).

Although research surrounding the asexual orientation continues to grow, limited literature focuses specifically on the development of an asexual identity or attempts to *place* this within the context of a heteronormative society. Thus, through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study aims to investigate the identity development and internalization of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation.

5.3 Method

5.3.1 *Research Design*

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). By asking questions that concern 'how' rather than 'what', IPA reveals the essence of meaning-making and lived-experience, particularly within the life narratives of non-heterosexual individuals (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Farmer & Byrd, 2015). Moreover, this approach grants an openness towards the diversity and differential experiences within a non-heterosexual community and provides insight into societal and cultural factors that influence identity development (Misgav, 2016). IPA's flexible methodology allows a greater understanding of the phenomena that relate to diverse sexual, affectional and gender categories (Chan & Farmer, 2017) and thus, is particularly fitting when investigating the asexual orientation. Moreover, as identity development and internalisation are not easily reached and potentially outside of our "perceptual field" (Pringle, 2011, p. 22), IPA may grant "more room for creativity and freedom", particularly during analysis and write-up of research. This will allow the reporting of results in an accessible manner (Pringle, 2011), while adhering to guidelines

regarding commitment, rigor and pertinence when studying existential experience (Finlay, 2011; Pringle, 2011). Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to engage in in-depth conversations with participants (Smith et al., 2009) and is therefore consistent with the idiographic commitments of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

5.3.2 *Participants*

Five participants between the ages of 18 and 40 who responded to the research call were interviewed. See table 5.1 for participant demographics. The researcher and participants did not have any interactions prior to completing the interviews. Inclusion criteria included participants that spoke fluent English, identified as asexual and described a lack of sexual attraction towards others. Sex, age, socioeconomic status, and romantic orientation were not considered criteria for exclusion. Participants were female, identified as asexual and gave a common understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual drive or desire directed towards others. Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Table 5.1. Participant Demographic

Participant	Sex	Age	Nationality	Sexual Orientation	Romantic Orientation	Relationship Status
Stephanie	Female	25	American	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Gwen	Female	18	French	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Vanessa	Female	29	American	Asexual	Biromantic	Single
Amanda	Female	32	British	Asexual	Aromantic	In a Relationship
Sara	Female	40	American	Asexual	Heteroromantic	Single

5.3.3 *Recruitment Procedures*

Participants were recruited through the online community AVEN between June and August 2019. An announcement advertising the research was posted on the AVEN discussion board along with researcher contact information and a statement detailing the research. Participants were not compensated. All participants were required to complete written and/or verbal informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw their participation both before and after taking part. Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board and permission to conduct this research was received from the AVEN Project Team. Following the interview, the researcher provided their contact information as well as details of sites linked to AVEN and other forms of support provided within the asexual community. Although sex was not a criterion for exclusion, all participants who responded to the research call identified as female. Recruitment was stopped when no new information emerged from the interviews and data saturation was attained. This may be seen through the replication of themes across interviews. Moreover, this sample size of five participants is in line with recommendations provided by Smith and Osborn (2008)

5.3.4 *Data Collection*

Each interview was conducted independently through Skype and lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with an average of 6o minutes. During the interview, the researcher engaged in active listening and was receptive to conversation and the accounts of participants. The researcher allowed the participant to lead the interview, describing in detail their experiences or beliefs that were

important to them and promoting unexpected developments within the conversation. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, questions varied between participants and topics of conversation followed suit. The researcher promoted the discussion of topics that were unexpected or appeared to hold significant meaning to each participant. Conversations were recorded using a dictaphone. The interview schedule was designed to facilitate a comfortable interaction between participant and researcher and was informed by extensive reading in the area of asexual identity development (Appendix II). Questions were phrased in an open format and were mainly descriptive in design. Constructs that underlined questions consisted of cognition, behavior, awareness, context, experience, relationships, nature of relationships, time in context and disclosure. Any initial impressions were recorded immediately after each interview and these 'reflections' or post-interview memos were utilized during the analysis phase.

5.4 Analysis

5.4.1 *Data Analytical Strategy*

To capture and explore the meanings that participants assigned to their experiences, interview transcripts were analyzed using IPA. Researchers employed a 'theme-within-case' approach, analysing each individual's account (Smith et al., 2009). This was achieved through a double hermeneutic process with authors attempting to understand how participants understood their experiences and the meanings that they assigned to this, as well as using cyclical analysis of themes, moving from individual to shared perspectives.

The first stage of analysis involved reading and re-reading each interview transcript several times. This led to the development of exploratory comments that

focused on semantic content and remained close to the participant's explicit meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This was followed by the development of initial codes whereby researchers reduced the volume of detail within the analysis, while maintaining complexity (Smith et al., 2009). Codes were then clustered into groups that formed emergent themes. The next stage involved grouping themes together to form main themes and allocating labels that best described the concepts underlying each cluster. At this stage, some themes were removed from the analysis as they failed to contribute towards the emerging structure or were supported with limited evidence (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This series of steps was repeated for each interview transcript. During the final stage of analysis, researchers observed the structure of each major theme and looked for comparisons across interviews. This involved a cross-case analysis of the five participants' accounts and led to the development of superordinate themes which detail how asexual individuals attribute meaning to the development of their asexual identities. They did this by reviewing theme maps and comparing verbatim extracts, memos and notes made throughout the interpretative process. A list of major themes and sub-themes present across interviews was then compiled (Smith et al., 2009). See table 5.2 for a list of major themes and sub-themes. When presenting the findings of this analysis, we provide a summary of participants' views and a discussion of the shared meaning for participants that correspond with the superordinate themes. This allowed us to capture the convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account. We present our analytic interpretation through a narrative account that is supported by verbatim extracts (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 5.2. List of Major Themes and Sub-themes

The Asexual Self

Embracing the Asexual Self

The Asexual Community

Asexual Pride

Discovering Asexuality

The Self as Other

Means of Discovery

Disclosure

Barriers to Disclosure

Process of Disclosure

Internal Motivations to Disclose

Reactions from Others

Barriers to Accepting Asexuality

Asexuality as Alien/Strange

Asexuality as Negative

Hidden Asexuality

Navigating Relationships

Incentives for Relationships

Boundaries within Relationships

Asexuality as an Obstacle

5.4.2 *Methodological Integrity*

Regular research team meetings and review of researcher interpretations granted credibility to the analysis and ensured the robustness and quality of the

emerging codes and themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). This involved a process of peer debriefing whereby researchers explained the logic behind the decisions made and clarified their interpretations to one another (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This minimized potential biases and highlighted any oversights within the analysis to grant a more complete interpretation. Reflexive bracketing allowed researchers to complete a series of 'reductions' which redirected potential distractions or preconceived assumptions of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA can be considered a double hermeneutic process, researchers continuously reflected on how their engagement with the data and area under investigation may have impacted their analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This allowed them to interpret the original expression or meaning within the text and granted greater insight into the phenomenology present. Finally, researchers engaged in a process called the 'hermeneutic circle', whereby they performed a cyclical or step-by-step analysis of the data (Smith et al., 2009). This caused researchers to move between words, sentences and complete text during analysis and record or make explicit any preconceptions that may influence their analysis (Weis et al., 2017).

5.4.3 *The Role of the Researcher*

The first author conducted all interviews and gathered the data used within this research. This meant that the research was led largely from an 'outsider' or 'etic' perspective. During the interviews, the researcher was aware that their position as an outsider could shift the dynamic of the interview and may cause participants to doubt their ability to relate to a topic of discussion. Despite these concerns, the researcher did not experience any dubiousness or reticence during the interviews. Each participant spoke candidly about their experience, and the researcher got a sense that

participants considered them trustworthy in their motives. To ensure that they used appropriate language and terminology related to the asexual orientation, the researcher familiarized themselves with the asexual community through platforms such as AVEN and Asexuality.LiveJournal. Moreover, the researcher kept a reflective journal in which they noted any preconceptions and assumptions both before, during and after each phase of analysis, as well as when completing the write-up.

5.5 Research Findings

Five superordinate themes were identified: the asexual self; discovering asexuality; disclosure; barriers to asexuality; and navigating relationships. While these themes were present for all five participants, their individual accounts were distinctive and subject to their varying experiences, romantic orientations, age and processes of identifying as asexual. The findings of this analysis will be presented through a summary of participants' views and will capture convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account (Smith et al., 2009).

5.5.1 *Participant 1: Stephanie*

'maybe there's something else going on here'

For Stephanie, a 25-year-old asexual aromantic woman, a sense of confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and an awareness of herself as different from her peers prompted the discovery of her asexual orientation. This sense of difference was initiated during college as she moved away from her conservative background, in which "sexuality wasn't really talked about" and noticed the importance that others placed on sexual and romantic relationships. She described

her college experience as a “learning curve” in which she became aware of herself as different from her peers “both personality wise and sexuality wise”. Moreover, her involvement in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships during this time reinforced an awareness of her lack of sexual attraction and encouraged her to find a space whereby “it’s ok not to want this”.

> uh in college is when it starts to get more serious or more mature so that’s what brought it to my attention I say oh now I’m having these encounters with men and I don’t really know why I’m feeling the way I am or why uh why I’m having encounters with women and I don’t know why I’m feeling this way. So then that ah prompted me to actually search “its ok to not want this”.

This is turn brought her to uncover the asexual community which she considered as a highly influential mode of awareness and understanding. Specifically, the asexual community granted Stephanie a greater sense of belonging and allowed her to relate to the “common” experiences of other asexuals. Conversely, the presence of diverse orientations within the asexual community appeared to impact Stephanie’s sense of being different in a positive way, as she described an openness towards varying sexual and romantic orientations. For example, while she defined herself as on the “extreme end of things”, she acknowledged that “people experience asexuality in very different ways” and “view intimacy very differently” within the asexual community. This understanding of the asexual community as diverse allowed Stephanie to better accept her lack of sexual and romantic attraction and disregard asexual stereotypes such as dressing modestly or not assuming a feminine role.

> A lot of people think “oh I’m asexual so in don’t wear makeup or I don’t take selfies or dress a certain way” but if you spend any amount of time in the asexual community, you’ll find that there’s everyone is pretty different in all of that.

‘not something that I should feel guilty about’

Following the discovery of her asexuality, Stephanie described a strong sense of self-acceptance and considered her lack of sexual attraction as perpetual or how she “always was”.

> So just acknowledging that it is part of nature, it is common, that nothing happened to me, no one made me this way. It’s just me and my personality and how I perceive the world around me.

This allowed her to move away from negative explanations and acknowledge her asexuality as “common” or just another sexual identity. Moreover, her identification as aromantic allowed her to understand her disinterest in forming committed or romantic relationships and set the precedent that it is a “no for everybody”.

‘They had no idea what it was’

Stephanie described a casual approach to disclosure despite a consciousness of the perceptions of others. For example, while she placed some significance on coming out to her parents, she did not feel the need to disclose to her peers and believed that they would be already aware of her asexual orientation.

> Um I told my parents, they're my parents they probably should know. And they're the only people I've told with "hey let's sit down I'm asexual" that's the only time that happened. Uh other times amongst friends or people in my general age group sometimes people already know what asexuality is so when we do come into conversations of "oh how many partners have you had" or "what's the best type of canoodling you done?" and you say "oh I'm just not that interested in that sort of things" and they say "oh are you asexual?" and I say "oh that's a word you could use" and then we kind of move on.

This relaxed approach to disclosure appeared as a protective mechanism against experienced or expected negative reactions. Moreover, she considered other people's reactions to her disclosure as dependent upon their knowledge of asexuality and understood her parents' negative response to her orientation as derivative of their conservative background and lack of awareness. For example, while she considered her parents' response to her orientation as a "big issue", she described her peers' reactions as more "open" and accepting.

> I had a big issue when telling my parents. They had no idea what it was they didn't know it was possible they usually just think "ah our child is sick somehow" and it's our fault that she's this way am so it's definitely good when they know about it when though most people don't it's good to just see people be accepting of your experiences.

Moreover, Stephanie related her parents' misunderstanding to her own lack of exposure to non-heterosexual orientations and again described awareness as key

to others' acceptance. This is witnessed through her changing perception of non-heterosexual orientations and in particular, the prevalence of homosexuality.

> Again sexuality wasn't really talked about when I was growing up. I didn't know what homosexuality was until I was like sixteen and even then I thought "oh it's just a few people who are born every ten years off in the mountains" (laughs) not really common it just it's fine there's gay I'll probably never meet anyone who is and now of course fast forward five years and one in four people I know experiences same sex attraction. But ah yeah that's just to talk about homosexuality all the other sexualities I didn't hear about 'til I got to college and had been there a bit.

'someone to 100% get me… connect with on every level'

In keeping with her aromantic orientation, Stephanie valued platonic relationships and desired to form deeper connections with family and friends. She described her ideal relationship as a "sibling-type relationship" and considered "conversational aspects" and "common interest" as "important". Moreover, Stephanie outlined boundaries within her platonic relationships and made it apparent that she did not desire "physical touch" or "exploring deep into the psyche of each other".

> Because again I don't like physical contact and I don't really want relationships to go down that particular path of intimacy that involves physical touch and again exploring deep into the psyche of each other whatever.

The presence of these boundaries corresponds with her accepted understanding of her orientation and her ability to express her limitations within platonic relationships.

'I'm asexual and most people are not'

Stephanie related her sense of being different from others to her asexual orientation. Specifically, she described a "wall" between herself and everyone else and, at times, considered herself as "less human". This sense of difference appeared to emerge from others' lack of awareness and a general consideration of asexuality as a "very out there conclusion". Moreover, she considered how her inability to comply with sexual and relationship norms caused her to explore "other answers or explanations for a long time" as she struggled to accept her asexuality.

5.5.2 *Participant 2: Gwen*

'something was a bit strange really'

At the time of interview, eighteen-year-old Gwen had just recently discovered and come to identify as both asexual and aromantic. The discovery of her asexual orientation appeared to stem from a concern surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and romantic inclinations, as well as an inability to identify with other non-heterosexual orientations. Despite the recent nature of her discovery, Gwen initially became aware of her lack of sexual and romantic attraction during her first relationship. This delay in her discovery of the asexual orientation is indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality.

> But ah I knew ah it's been a long time I think ah since primary school actually since I ah since I met my first boyfriend in primary school… he was a very nice boy actually we're still on good terms ah still ah friends and he's absolutely fine now but I ah never really had feelings for him or anything (pause) and ah that's when I realized that maybe something was a bit ah bit off – to say it.

Moreover, a fear that her lack of sexual attraction may be derivative of her autism, mental health difficulties, or as a result of being sexually "repressed", reinforced her desire to later seek alternative explanations.

> I felt that something was a bit wrong with me. I didn't know what it was exactly (pause) I might have am trouble with hormone levels or something like that. I felt I had a mental health issue and so that led me to being ah repressed.

This led Gwen to actively research her lack of sexual attraction before eventually discovering asexuality. In addition to this, exposure to a gay fictional character appeared to enhance Gwen's awareness of other sexual orientations which in turn caused her to consider the possibility of being something other than heterosexual.

> then I encountered the word am later I think it was a few weeks ago (pause) basically I decided to research some sexual orientations because I watched a video it was my favorite (inaudible) coming out as gay so am I decided to educate myself a bit in that.

'They obviously know what I am'

Gwen understood AVEN as a source of support and channel for self-discovery. Specifically, she described how the presence of an "introductory post", as well as a "supportive" and "very welcoming" environment gave her a space to safely explore and be open with her asexuality. Moreover, exposure to other asexuals online appeared to ameliorate Gwen's previous sense of otherness and fear of sexual pathology.

> The people on the forums… the forums I go to the asexuality forums AVEN, they know obviously so am well my orientation is basically on the side bar. They obviously know what I am and have even am have even created an introductory post and am they have been very welcoming actually, very supportive.

'…and then things clicked'

Gwen expressed gratitude towards her newfound knowledge of the orientation and felt "glad that there's a word that exists" for her lack of sexual attraction. Her sense of "relief" was apparent through her description of the orientation as a "simple word" that allowed her to recognize her lack of sexual attraction as a legitimate orientation and not derivative of her autism. Moreover, when reflecting on her past relationships, Gwen interpreted her behavior through her asexual and aromantic orientations, which in turn, allowed her to better understand why she "wasn't up to a relationship".

> But it's just a valid sexual orientation like any other sexual orientation so I'm as valid as anyone else… But to be fair I have met, heard of autistics who have sexual urge, sexual competency with a sexual orientation of any kind really.

Gwen's displays of asexual pride helped to form her sense of asexual identity and self-acceptance. Interestingly, her decision to wear "just a black ring" that she considers as "discreet" is in keeping with the recent nature of her identification and growing sense of asexual pride.

> it's a pride ring it's an ace ring if you prefer (pause) it's how you ah express pride in your sexual orientation when you're asexual. It's basically a black ring – nothing too fancy just a black ring that needs to be worn on the middle finger.

'somebody just to talk to… nothing more actually'

Gwen outlined the presence of strict parameters within her relationships and sought to maintain non-sexual and non-intimate, or purely platonic friendships. She achieved this by making her physical and romantic limits evident to others and rationalized her decision through her identification as both aromantic and asexual. Moreover, Gwen depended on the quality of her platonic relationships and sought to develop strong emotional connections.

> Maybe somebody I can ah somebody I can ah have fun with. Somebody I am well ah just discuss ah somebody just to talk to. Nothing more actually just somebody who spending time with is pleasant.

'at first I completely rejected it'

A consideration of asexuality as negative and an inability to accept that she was something "different from straight" appeared as barrier to both the acceptance and disclosure of Gwen's asexual orientation. For example, Gwen understood her

asexuality as a burden to her family and feared disappointing her parents by not providing grandchildren.

> it's obviously quite a lot to take in for my parents… Because basically they won't have any grandchildren from my side… Naturally they want me to be happy and am… but yeah it's still a lot to take in for them.

Moreover, Gwen discussed how a lack of information surrounding asexuality contributed towards her initial misunderstanding of the orientation, as well as current misunderstandings from others. For example, she described how asexuality is "completely unknown" where she lives, with limited exposure in media and news articles.

> I think ah there have been ah a couple of articles about it pretty recent and I think ah one ace I think was featured in the news last year but am (pause) yeah I the TV channel but ah pretty much flew off of the radars.

As mentioned previously, Gwen displayed her asexual pride covertly, with an awareness that the ace ring would not be easily recognized as symbolic of asexuality. Her use of the word "code" when describing the ace ring is again indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality and acts as a further barrier to the orientation.

> that's the code to say you're ace well ah asexual. That's how you recognize asexuals in public and that's how you can ah show pride. It's pretty ah… I like it because it's pretty ah discreet ah it just looks like an old black ring.

'you are the first person I came out to face-to-face'

Although she had not disclosed her asexuality outside of the asexual community or this interview, Gwen expressed an assumption that others would react negatively towards her orientation. Moreover, she feared that others would assume that her asexuality was derivative of her autism or that she had "invented" her asexuality. This reinforced a negative understanding of asexuality as Gwen incorporated her parents' assumed reactions into her own understanding of the orientation.

> They might tell me that my sexuality doesn't exists and ah another of my main fears yeah that I might be told am this is a pretty strange thing. I might also be told that my ah my ah I might act like that towards sex because I'm autistic too.

5.5.3 *Participant 3: Vanessa*

'…holy s* that's me'**

For Vanessa, a 29-year-old asexual biromantic woman, the process of discovering her asexual orientation was initiated through a desire to seek alternative explanations for her lack of sexual attraction and overcome an ongoing sense of self-conflict.

> I have been having trouble dealing with but then the hyper-critical portion of my brain was like "no you're not asexual you just have a crap ton of issues" and it all of this and even as I was having this conflict in my head, I started doing more research into asexuality like googling asexuality.

Specifically, she wished to move beyond negative explanations for her discomfort during sex including sexual trauma, introversion, anxiety and body-image issues.

> I was never really comfortable with it (sex), and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or… because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like… engage with people.

Vanessa referred to fiction and YouTube as a mean of discovery, although she noted that this was supported by online resources such as AVEN, in which she gained clarity through other asexual individuals' accounts. This allowed her to move beyond a sense of "conflict" and make sense of past experiences surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

> I was like that's been me! Like those moments of like hearing other people's stories either through fiction or YouTube videos or forms online or things like and being like oh my gosh the moments that I've experienced, that's the feeling that I've been feeling. Those recognitions like that's what really helped me to start feeling like maybe asexuality is really who I am and it's not just a result of trauma. It's not a result of social anxiety.

'I got to a point where I was like "yes this is me"'

Upon discovering the asexual orientation, Vanessa described an "immediate" recognition that was accompanied by a sense of relief and a "release of tension". In

doing this, she positioned asexuality as an "answer" and "connected" with the orientation.

> Like my first thing when I really started to believe it and really started to accept it was just like deep sigh from like every muscle and bone in my body. This just release of tension and this knowledge of like I was ok.

Moreover, Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as varied allowed her to accept her biromantic orientation and her capacity to engage in romantic relationships. This gave Vanessa the "space" to explore her orientation and engage in romantic relationships despite her lack of sexual attraction.

> let me explore it figure out you know is this something? Is this not something? How does this impact things? Does it change things? Does it not? Am so you know in that regards my, I currently feel very strongly about the term bi-romantic.

A sense of shared community was expressed by Vanessa as she considered AVEN to be a source of "comfort" and support system for self-discovery and the acceptance of her orientation. Specifically, she described AVEN as a forum where she could express concerns surrounding her lack of sexual attraction, share her experiences with others and develop a sense of camaraderie. For example, "seeing" or "hearing other people's stories" allowed her to "believe", "accept" and "claim" asexuality as part of her identity.

> the relief that like moved into exuberance when I had this connection was incredible and I try to remember that feeling when life gets tough and people ask

me or say things that I'm pretty sure every ace person who I chatted with online has had some experience of someone just saying "will you have sex with me and I will make you all better".

"Have you heard about this thing called asexuality?"

Vanessa's described her past experiences of coming out as "painful", "uncomfortable" and "hurtful", and sought to protect herself when disclosing her orientation in the future. Moreover, she considered how her disclosure may impact others and concealed her orientation to protect her family from their own negative reactions. For example, her family's struggle to accept queer identities deterred her from disclosing her asexuality as she considered the stress that her disclosure may cause.

I think it's more to do with the struggles that they've had over the past couple of years because they've tried to engage in the conversation about what gender queer is with certain members of our family and it didn't necessarily go very well.

These negative reactions, whether expected from family members or experienced within past relationships, led to Vanessa's cautious approach to disclosure and avoidance of romantic relationships.

that I had difficulties in relationships, that I had difficulties around partners. That was very hard and that's why I honestly stopped dating and why I stopped seeing and socializing with people a lot because there's just something wrong with you.

Moreover, these responses to her disclosure appeared to later influence who she decided to come out to and how she approached this. For example, within her current approach to dating, she described initially disclosing her biromantic orientation and gauging others' knowledge of asexuality before coming out as asexual.

> the first round is definitely like the bi conversation and then if I think that they can go more then there's the asexuality conversation… am because I think if you can't accept the idea of me being romantically attracted to other people of different genders then you are definitely not going to get the ace portion of my life and who I am.

Despite an apprehensiveness towards coming out, Vanessa felt that disclosure was necessary when pursuing romantic relationships. For example, she described disclosing her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters.

> this is a conversation that I need to have and they need to be aware before I go further that if there is any sexual contacts it's going to be extremely minimal. Am and it's not something that I am interested in pursuing.

'being very open and honest about it'

Vanessa sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and maintained a strong desire to have a family. Specifically, she desired "companionship" as well as a "committed" relationship in which both partners supported one another.

> I also want to find a way to have a relationship with someone that is committed in the way that I need it to be committed… We have this intention of being together and supporting each other not someone who comes and goes but you know, is more or less at home every night that idea of commitment as spending my life with someone.

Despite these desires, Vanessa considered the prospect of finding love as "hopeless" and attributed this to her inability to maintain a relationship with a non-asexual partner. Again, she recalled past negative experiences in which her lack of sexual attraction ultimately became an issue within her relationship.

> Majority of my dating experiences are – tend to be more like – they start out fine like no more than any first date and getting to know people can be am and then inevitably there begins to be issues and things. Either related to asexuality or other stuff like will kind of like fizzle away or stop.

To combat this, Vanessa described a willingness to engage in mild forms of physical affection and considered the prospect of multiple partners. For example, she did not expect to be "the sole partner" within her relationship and had "no issue" with her partner "having sex with other people". She did however express her limits regarding physical affection and set strict boundaries that withheld sexual activity.

> I got to a point where I was like "yes I want to be in a romantic relationship, I want to have a partner, I want to have that companionship" ah like some amount of physical contact like I'm ah fine with kissing ah to a certain extent. I'm like very fine with like hugs, affectionate touch but just not sexual touch.

‘have still not met in person someone I know to be ace’

Vanessa’s understanding of asexuality as ‘other’ was compounded by an assumption of stigma and doubt surrounding the legitimacy of her asexual orientation. For example, she feared that others would be unable to comprehend her lack of sexual attraction and this in turn, acted as a barrier towards openly expressing her asexual identity.

> the idea of being asexual is so far outside the norm.... The whole reason that I’m so anxious is because I’m afraid that my asexuality is so other that the probability is an awkward “we don’t know what to do with you anymore because you’re like a weird person”.

Moreover, an inability to comply with sexual culture appeared highly stressful for Vanessa and she had, at times, considered her lack of sexual desire as “inescapable” and feared that others would be intolerant or dismissive of her asexuality.

> You just have these things that are never going to go away, and the vast majority of human beings aren’t willing to like put up or understand you and that is a very hard feeling to live with this like the notion that there’s something wrong with you and it’s never going to go away and it’s never going to get better.

This awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid, or a “choice” had previously caused Vanessa to question the legitimacy of her orientation and relate her lack of sexual attraction to trauma, introversion, anxiety and poor body-image.

> I was never really comfortable with it and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or… because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like… engage with people around sex just from like a body image issue. So I had like all of this stuff in my head, and so I was like it must be all of this like the reason I have issues it must be because of all of this and it was really classifying my disinterest in sex as being an issue, something wrong with me.

Moreover, a lack of exposure to asexuality contributed to Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as hidden and subsequent deterrence from the orientation. For example, she discussed how she had never knowingly been in the company of another asexual individual.

> I am different in a way that I had you know no personal, no known personal - like to this day I have still not met in person someone I know to be ace. I'm sure I've had interactions with people but I've not known going into or as part of the conversation that they are.

Although Vanessa identified as a biromantic asexual woman, she often portrayed herself to others as heterosexual and described being typically "assumed as straight". She recalled that she would "lie" or "misdirect" others when discussing her sexuality and would "inflate" past sexual experiences. This desire to disguise her asexuality within social circles appeared stem from a desire to fit in and to be "a part of that conversation".

> like out in a bar someone starts talking about the sex that they're having or the things that they're doing, and ah for whatever reason I'm prompted to speak

> then I lie for lack – misdirect maybe?... I will call upon my past sexual experiences and inflate them and make them sound better than they were for me. Am, to just be a part of that conversation.

5.5.4 *Participant 4: Amanda*

'I sort of figured myself out'

For Amanda, an asexual aromantic woman, a sense of the self as different and "unable to relate" to other people's relationships, caused her to seek an explanation for her lack of sexual attraction.

> I do... would particularly notice that's there's a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically. Normally both together and its sort of, there can be a sense of being different from that.

This involved exploring other orientations as Amanda initially questioned whether she may be gay or bisexual and engaged in what she considered "awkward" relationships.

> I've tried different well when I was high school, I initially thought I was gay and then I started thinking ok, I must be bi like ok I'm not very good at either of these like ok. And I kept on going from one awkward relationship to another.

The failure of these relationships led to further searching and the eventual discovery of asexuality online. During this process, Amanda described AVEN as a mode of understanding and considered the internet as an invaluable "source of information".

> Am I think the internet in terms of increasing can actually help people increase their self-awareness. Am I'm not a massive fan of labels but if it increases your self-awareness, you know it can limit confusion and what not?

'putting my identity down and a bit firmer'

Identification with both asexual and aromantic orientations allowed Amanda to understand her lack of sexual and romantic attraction. Specifically, this gave Amanda the opportunity to make sense of her experiences within past relationships and move beyond negative explanations surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

> but I found the more I sort of figured myself out the more it sort of answered a lot of things a lot of past relationships had left a lot of questions… am, so it sort of answered an awful lot of past experiences, am I could have gone ah, this is because of x, y, z not because of who knows?

Moreover, her understanding of asexuality as a "spectrum" and the opportunity to "curate" a specific romantic or sexual identity strengthened Amanda's recognition of the self as asexual. For example, this allowed Amanda to engage in a queer platonic relationship (QPR) and make sense of both her and her partner's opposing romantic and sexual orientations.

> she's homoromantic heterosexual. Ah that's how she's explained it to me where she's like homoromantic heterosexual and all that sort of thing… Am with me she's homoromantic ace in that sense. Am but of course I'm an aromantic ace.

Following her identification as asexual, Amanda displayed her pride by advocating openly for asexuality and other non-heterosexual orientations. She did

this by organizing an aromantic and asexual social group within her local community and attempted to educate members of her church about the asexual orientation.

> I mean I organize a local ace and aro social group. Because there wasn't anything out there, so I do that as well. Am if it wasn't out there I basically would – it had to be more proactive in that sense.

'they're quite accepting of it'

Amanda described a casual approach to disclosing her asexuality despite an awareness of the perceptions of others and a consideration of the process as "awkward". This approach was reinforced by past positive experiences of coming-out, in which she received acceptance and support from family friends and within her faith community. She understood this support through the "openness" and inclusivity of others and considered negative reactions to be rooted in a lack of awareness. She described the view that asexuals are "scared of sex" as "misconstrued", again indicating how a lack of information underpins these misunderstandings.

> but yeah I used to go to a book group which am but there was I mean am like there was one guy who was quite he made quite aphobic comments he was basically implying that asexuals are actually just scared of sex and I was like well, are you scared of female intercourse or of lesbians or you know and don't believe if they haven't heard that comment made at them.

'find yourself out of situations unintentionally'

A societal pressure to “pair off” and to adhere to the norms of her religious ideology had previously deterred Amanda from her asexual and aromantic orientations.

> But you know especially being from a Christian background you’ve sort of got that expectation of you’ve got this ideal of loving relationship and you sort of just try to fit into that. That ideal which you’ve been told.

Moreover, an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation inhibited Amanda’s willingness to accept both her asexual and aromantic orientations. She described feeling “left behind” within a “romanticized world” as she could not take part in “couples only” activities and “talk kiddies” with family and friends.

> there’s a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically... Am, and your friends start suddenly start partnering off and the whole order. All their needs met in that romantic/sexual. And they’ve got married and they’ve had kids and suddenly you’ve done suddenly you’ve grown apart because I’m not sort of in their circles.

Moreover, minimal information and “exposure” to asexuality heightened Amanda’s confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction. This was exemplified through a lack of readily accessible information, as well as her discovery of the orientation online.

> Well, when I first – it was mentioned – I saw it on a website, and I thought asexual what's that? I googled it and I thought – I was reading through the description, and I thought that explains a lot.

'it's a platonic relationship that's more committed'

Despite some reservations, Amanda's motivation to engage in a QPR was grounded in a desire to fit into societal expectations, as well as a need for companionship.

> it's how society's expectations to pair you off that has left me to agree to enter into it. Whereas it perhaps wouldn't be my first choice to enter into a QPR or QPP what have you a queer platonic partnership.

She actively rejected the romantic element of her QPR and set the precedence that she would not behave romantically or sexually with her partner. This understanding of her relationship as "platonic", or similar to a "close friendship", aligns with her self-concept as an asexual/aromantic individual. However, Amanda considered her partner's desire for romance as a "strain" within their relationship and described their current status as in a "bad situation". This stemmed from the presence of differing orientations, as Amanda and her partner's "wants" conflicted with the actuality of their QPR.

> I don't know if you ever had your best friend in school but imagine that as an adult and spending that best friend time together and doing best friend stuff but being an adult… am but in adult ways I suppose that's the best way I could

normally describe it, but she comes on it from more of a romantic stance which puts a bit of a more strain onto the relationship but.

5.5.5 *Participant 5: Sara*

'I kind of figured – like that is what I called myself'

Sara, a 40-year-old asexual heteroromantic woman, initially became aware of her lack of sexual attraction during high school. Unlike her peers, she lacked interest in forming romantic relationships and was unable to understand the emphasis that others placed on "pairing off".

> Mid-high school when I noticed how everyone would be you know all the girls want to talk about boys and everybody starts you know pairing off… I'm like I'm not interested in this.

This disinterest in forming relationships brought her to develop an initial understanding of her asexuality, which she described as an independent process. Specifically, she referred to the terms "amoral" and "asexual reproduction" when devising a way to understand her lack of sexual attraction.

> Am but like you know "a" like I was mentioning amoral and when you read the Scarlet Letter or maybe one of those plays that you have to read back when ah you're in high school. Am I was just kind of like "meh" wonder if there is something referring to asexual. I had actually thought of that term for a very long time because of you know, asexual reproduction and biological senses. Am… so I kind of figured – like that is what I called myself.

Despite being aware of her lack of sexual attraction during her teens, Sara continued to search for her sexuality into her early twenties and engaged in a sexual relationship with a friend. She considered this experience to confirm her asexuality and her indifference towards sex.

> And just you know I had sex with him the one time and I'm like "meh" ok whatever, but I have no desire to do that again. So, like I did because I felt like if I don't ever try maybe I didn't, I'm not gonna know or I'm not gonna have done that thing that would make me have that desire.

Although Sara discovered her asexuality "pre-internet", she later used online resources to enhance her understanding and awareness of her orientation and acknowledged the role of asexual communities such as AVEN.

> But I only ever really thought to "hey I wonder if there's something I could google" like maybe five years ago (laughs) when I was thirty-five-ish and then I was like cool. That's how I found AVEN which is how I found you.

'Just kind of accepted it'

Sara's understanding of herself as a "textbook" asexual is indicative of how the orientation effectively describes and defines her lack of sexual attraction. In doing this, she reiterates both her heteroromantic orientation and unwillingness to engage in a sexual relationship.

> I'm pretty textbook… Hetero-romantic asexual I do have the, the romantic feelings towards men, I like men not women. And I also have absolutely no desire to have sex with them.

Moreover, a sense of community gained through AVEN appeared to enhance Sara's self-identification as asexual and reduced her feelings of being different. Specifically, an understanding of the asexual community as growing or "developing", reinforced Sara's sense of the asexual self, as she considered the orientation increasingly recognized and accepted within media and literature.

> Yeah that was when I determined oh this is actually a thing and people actually discuss it. I got one of those, I forget which book it is but there is a relatively prominent book that everybody was mentioning so I read that just because I was curious.

'I kind of don't want them to feel alone'

Sara is selective in her disclosure and chooses to come out to people who she feels will be accepting of her asexuality or are already aware of the asexual orientation. She describes disclosing only to "very good friends" who she "trusts" or has "known for while". As a result of her attempts to "distinguish between people", Sara describes only experiencing "enthusiastic" and positive responses to her orientation. Sara also describes disclosing her asexuality to increase knowledge of the orientation and relates her experiences to other asexuals. For example, she noted that her disclosure may act as a source of "comfort" to other asexuals who are "struggling" or "having the same I'm alone in the world thoughts".

> One of them I have not had the discussion with, but I feel like I should probably bring it up with her at some point just in case she's having the same "I'm alone in the world" thoughts… but we're both clearly completely uninterested in relationships or perfectly fine living by ourselves.

Moreover, she often felt compelled to disclose her orientation to address others' assumptions regarding her single status and to avoid being set-up on dates by friends.

> People will notice that I don't have a husband and I don't date anybody, and eventually good friends will ask and try to set me up with somebody and then I'll be like dude you know, this is like the deal. And that's the only real expression that I would say I would have been when I discuss it with people and that's usually just when I have to bring it up either because of questions that they're throwing at me.

'They would think that it was just an excuse'

An awareness of asexuality as different from both heterosexual and other non-heterosexual orientations enhanced Sara's sense of otherness. For example, she recognized that "pairing off" happens for both her heterosexual and homosexual friends, and as a result considered asexuality as outside of the LGBT umbrella.

> I have quite a few gay friends but they're sexual in general and the relationships and the pairing off happens on that side too. The aces are kind of right in the middle, uninterested (laughs)… It does not really fit. I don't think it fits all that well the LGBT either.

Moreover, she considered how a lack of information hindered her acceptance of her orientation and others' awareness of asexuality. For example, she described asexuality as "inconceivable" and maintained that minimal information contributes towards other people's ongoing misinterpretations.

> I just recently had ah a friend who I had a discussion with and he was really not like, he wasn't upset, he was just amazed that that was like a thing. Because it had never crossed his mind.

Interestingly, Sara distinguished exposure to asexuality by "age" and discussed how this may have hindered the initial acceptance of her orientation. She recalled that in the past "there was no talking about this sort of thing" and described how there being "no social media" contributed towards her "limited" information. Moreover, Sara acknowledged the role of research within the growing awareness and acceptance of asexuality.

> I have a feeling that you could count that on a couple of hands in this country. For people my age and older. Not because people think it's bad or wrong just because nobody is really aware and those that felt that way growing up just kind of accepted it and moved on and didn't really am think of the possibility. Now there is, there's research being done. People are more aware.

'I have basically kind of stopped it'

Sara desired romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and placed emphasis on the security and comfort that this would provide. For example, she considered the prospect of a life partner who she could have children and grow old with.

> It would be very nice to have somebody as you're growing older, who would have children with you. Who would maybe take care of you when you're old and doddering.

Despite this desire for companionship, she understood her asexuality as an obstacle within relationships and feared that a potential partner would consider her asexuality as an "excuse". This sentiment was reinforced by a sense of "guilt", as she felt that a relationship without a sexual component would be "unfair" to her partner. This led Sara to consider rejection as "inevitable" and thus, contributed towards her unwillingness to pursue a romantic relationship.

> You know, so I have basically kind of stopped. It seems like relatively mean to them because that's part of why most men consider part of a relationship so… because that's not what I want that's just a, I don't know. Just kind of a rambling explanation but… Like if a guy wants sex I don't know if I feel right am having him decide to am limit his relationship in that way because that's not what I want.

5.5.6 *Convergence and Divergence across Cases*

In the following section, we will discuss how super-ordinate themes manifested differently within each individual's account. Specifically, we will focus on how experiences associated with participants' asexual orientation were subject to other dimensions of identity such as romantic orientation and age.

All participants discussed the process of embracing their asexual identity, and how this led to a heightened sense of clarity, self-acceptance, and justification for their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, each participant referred to the asexual community and recognised its importance in the development and acceptance of their asexual identity. According to participants, the discovery of their asexual orientation was initiated through confusion, negativity, and a sense of being different

from others. Although all participants recognised the role of the asexual community within their discovery, Sara formed her initial understanding independently. This is suggestive of the role of age within asexual individuals' discovery and highlights increasing visibility and access to the asexual orientation.

For some participants, a fear of negative reactions, a general misunderstanding of asexuality and past experiences of stigmatisation inhibited the disclosure of their asexual orientation. Moreover, this process appeared to be influenced by the presence of romantic or aromantic orientations. For example, Amanda and Vanessa's differing approaches to disclosure appeared to be influenced by positive and negative experiences respectively. Moreover, as a biromantic asexual, Vanessa felt the need to disclose her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters. This contrasts with Stephanie's account who, as an aromantic asexual, did not emphasise the need to disclose her orientation.

While participants' interpretations of their relationships converged on many levels, there were notable discrepancies when comparing their accounts. For example, while Vanessa and Sara sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda desired purely platonic friendships. Moreover, while all participants outlined the existence of boundaries within their relationships, this differed depending on their romantic orientation. For example, while Vanessa and Sara were willing to engage in mild forms of physical affection, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda made it apparent that they did not desire physical touch or emotional intimacy.

5.6 Discussion

This study outlines the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual women's identity development, as well as how they attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. The themes identified within this study correspond with current theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, and experiences of minority stress that arise from a heteronormative society. Moreover, this study provides patterns of convergence and divergence across cases that are specific to romantic orientation and age. Although we acknowledge that experiences associated with asexuality may be subject to gender, the homogenous nature of our sample did not allow for the identification of factors specific to women.

5.6.1 *Research Findings and Theoretical Implications*

Consistent with past research surrounding the experiences of being asexual, the development of participants' asexual identities was initiated through awareness of the self as different within society (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019) and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016). As participants came to identify with the asexual orientation, they gained a more positive self-understanding, embraced their lack of sexual attraction to others (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and gained a sense of "relief" (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 55). Moreover, it was apparent that self-categorization with the asexual community subdued a sense of otherness associated with their lack of sexual desire (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021) and allowed

participants to move beyond individualized self-questioning (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

This path to self-discovery corresponds with other models of non-heterosexual identity development, in which gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals engage in a process of self-questioning, experimentation and conflict, before eventually embracing their sexual identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Like our findings, online communities have been shown to assist in the development of non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe and relatively anonymous space to develop an individual's sexual identity and connect with a larger non-heterosexual group (Harper et al., 2016; Pingel et al., 2013). Moreover, similar to other frameworks of non-heterosexual identity development, participation within a supportive environment appeared to enhance the saliency of participants' identities within their self-concepts (Gordon & Silva, 2015). As these communities were typically accessed online, this reinforces an understanding of the internet as an alternative mode of non-heterosexual identity development, particularly when the identity in question is not readily accessible or subject to societal discrimination (Harper et al., 2016).

Throughout interviews, it was apparent that heteronormative ideals instilled a negative understanding of asexuality, with some participants considering sexual and romantic desires as mandatory and felt that were being excluded or 'left behind'. Like past literature surrounding asexuality, this caused participants to internalize a sense of compulsory sexuality (McInroy et al., 2020) and for some, acted as a threat to their personal identity and positive self-perceptions (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). This in turn, brought participants to doubt the

legitimacy of their lack of sexual attraction and the credibility of asexuality within sexualised cultures (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, an awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid or a choice caused some participants to consider alternative explanations for their lack of sexual desire such as autism, trauma, introversion and body-image issues. This negative understanding of asexuality corresponds with past research in which heteronormative ideals contribute towards a more distressing sexual questioning process for non-heterosexual individuals (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Moreover, these findings also correspond with minority stress theory whereby non-heterosexual individuals may internalize negative sentiments held towards their orientation (Russell & Fish, 2016).

Similar to past research surrounding the experience of being asexual, participants' perceived invisibility of their orientation reinforced an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation (Gupta, 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Again, this sense of invisibility appeared to stem predominantly from compulsory sexuality and heteronormative ideals (Vares, 2021), as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). Moreover, this corresponds with past literature whereby a lack of exposure to similar others and to non-heterosexual communities have been found to exacerbate the hidden nature of non-heterosexual identities (Rosario et al., 2006) and reinforce feelings of inadequacy surrounding romantic desires and relationship dynamics (Robertson, 2014). The prescription of heteronormative ideals can prevent information about non-heterosexual identities from being accessed or heard (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020) and similar to our findings,

cause non-heterosexual individuals to doubt the legitimacy of their sexual orientation (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003).

As in previous research surrounding the disclosure of an asexual orientation, participants' approach to coming out was influenced by past negative experiences (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019), a fear of stigmatization (Robbins et al., 2016) and others' assumption of sexual pathology (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). As seen within proposed models of non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, participants considered others' positive reactions to be dependent on increased knowledge and awareness of asexuality (Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, some participants' concealment of their asexuality due to a fear of dismissal and rejection is reminiscent of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003).

Participants' motivations to engage in relationships and doubts surrounding the feasibility of a sexless relationship correspond with past research. For example, while aromantic participants sought companionship without an element of sexual or romantic attraction (Brotto et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), heteroromantic and biromantic participants desired emotionally intimate relationships and were willing to engage in some forms of sexual activity (Foster et al., 2019; Haefner, 2011) or an open relationship (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, like previous research on asexual individuals' relationships, some participants questioned the feasibility of a sexless relationship with a non-asexual partner (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and were subsequently inactive in their approach to finding a partner (Maxwell, 2017).

5.6.2 *Future Recommendations*

As this research was carried out using IPA, the findings of this research are not meant to be generalizable to the asexual population. It is, however, recommended that future research should consider multiple genders when investigating the identify development of asexual individuals and processes of internalization. This may provide valuable information surrounding the significance of gender roles and expressions within the identity development of asexual individuals. Moreover, considering the role that online communities and AVEN appear to play within themes, future research should attempt to access participants through various means. This may provide a broader understanding of asexual identity development and processes of internalization that extends beyond the realms of the online asexual community.

Chapter 6 Thematic Analysis: Supplementary Methodology

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual women's identity development and how they attempted to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. Features of identity development outlined in this study corresponded with existing models of non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, and themes previously identified in my scoping review. Moreover, this study provided preliminary evidence for patterns of convergence and divergence across cases that appeared specific to participants' romantic orientation and gender identity.

Although these findings are not generalisable to asexual people, they encouraged me to further examine the role of gender and romantic orientation within asexual identity development and internalisation. Moreover, this brought me to consider the intersection of gender and romantic identity within heteronormative and allonormative environments and how this may provide insight into the complexity of asexual individuals' experiences. I also noticed that up until now, these personal and societal factors had yet to be comprehensively investigated and thus began the next phase of my research. In doing this, I respond directly to recommendations outlined in my previous study and follow the movement towards differentiating sexual and romantic orientation in research.

In chapter seven, I examine the responses of 99 participants with varying romantic and gender identities, all of whom identify along the asexual spectrum. Through both thematic analysis and intersectional theory, this study demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities within asexual identity

development. The focus of this supplementary chapter is to provide extended information surrounding the design and implementation of this study that could not be included in a publication-style framework. This includes detailed discussion of research design, ethical considerations and data analysis. This is followed by a chapter summary and contribution to the overall thesis aims and objectives.

6.1 Choosing Thematic Analysis

To effectively carry out this study, I needed to interpret data in a way that was consistent with participants' accounts. Thematic analysis achieved this through its flexible approach and ability to provide detailed analysis of participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, thematic analysis allowed me to identify, analyse and report themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that portrayed differences and similarities among participants (Creswell, 2009) and categorised phenomena according to both their discrepancies and commonalities. The process of coding and categorising data during the interpretative phase of my analysis provided a robust and systematic framework to create a logical chain of evidence and relate themes back to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Creswell, 2009). This structured approach to data handling was particularly useful when analysing the large dataset included in this study and producing a coherent final report (King, 2004).

6.2 Research Design

Sampling in Thematic Analysis

As this study aimed to investigate the intersection of gender and romantic orientation within asexual identity development and internalisation, I included

participants with a wide range of gender and romantic identities. Moreover, while sample sizes can vary in thematic analysis studies (Fugard & Potts, 2015), I felt that a sample size of 10 to 12 participants would reach data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As seen in my previous study, participants were required to be eighteen years or over, with no criteria for a specific sociodemographic status, sexual, romantic or gender identity. Moreover, when completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to respond to the question "what does the term asexuality mean to you?". This ensured that participants included in this study were aware of the term asexuality and could self-identify accordingly. When the questionnaire was released online, I received a high response rate of 159 individuals in total. Although this far exceeded the previously established sample size, I felt that it was most appropriate to include all participant responses and honour the information that they had provided. This high response rate was indicative of the emerging nature of asexuality and the asexual community's desire to increase awareness and visibility through research. Prior to completing my analysis, I removed 60 participants' responses as they were under 18 or had not fully completed the questionnaire.

Data Collection: Online Open-ended Questionnaire

I used an online open-ended questionnaire to gather data for this study. I considered this to be a particularly effective to way gain access to the asexual population and to overcome any barriers associated with the marginalised nature of this community (McInroy, 2016). Moreover, the use of an online questionnaire allowed me to access the accounts of a wide range of asexual people with varying sexual, romantic and gender identities, and assisted in the representativeness of my data. Collecting data online facilitated anonymity and benefitted the openness and honesty of participants' responses. Moreover, this allowed participants to complete

the questionnaire at their own pace or return to the questionnaire at a later date (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Although this form of data collection did lead to a high rate of attrition, I considered this to be an ethical benefit as participants felt that they could remove themselves easily from the study. My use of Qualtrics software to create and distribute the questionnaire allowed me to download data easily and store information in Microsoft Excel format. This ensured that data was organised and coded in a way that did not compromise content or visual representation.

6.3 Ethical Considerations: Informed Consent and Research Online

Participants taking part in this research were 18 years or over and were required to complete informed consent. I provided participants with an information sheet detailing their right to withdraw from the study, the implications of my research and expected dissemination. I also provided them with my contact details and information on support groups. To ensure participant anonymity, I did not collect any identifiable information. The open-ended questionnaire was designed so that at no stage of taking part in this study would participants feel uneasy or uncomfortable with the disclosure of their information. To minimise site disruption and ensure that AVEN remains a safe space for all users, my research call was posted to a designated space by an AVEN moderator. I collected and processed all data in line with European Union legislation (GDPR) and the Irish Data Protection Act (2018). Extensive documentation and metadata were maintained alongside all open-ended questionnaires. This included blank questionnaires/consent forms, anonymised participant responses, a reflective journal and evidence of code and theme formation. All gathered data were stored in a password protected laptop with an encrypted hard-drive and will be retained for a period of ten years.

6.4 Performing Thematic Analysis

Throughout the analytic phase of this research, I took several steps to ensure the credibility and reliability of emerging codes and themes. This included peer debriefing and reflexive journaling (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999), as well as record keeping of raw data and theme formation (Halpern, 1983). This allowed me to maintain a detailed account of my impression of the data, with peer debriefing providing an external check on my analytic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, this involved cross-examination of themes and continuous reflection of my own interpretations. To enhance the integrity of my findings and ensure effective data collection, I designed the questionnaire to be non-leading and unbiased and carried out several revisions in conjunction with my supervisor. Moreover, to increase reproducibility of my research, I provide evidence of the theoretical and methodological decisions made throughout this study (Koch, 1994).

Inductive Thematic Analysis and Semantic Interpretation

An inductive or 'bottom-up' approach to data analysis is considered particularly useful when exploring a new or emerging area of research (Braun & Clarke, 2006), such as asexual identity development and internalisation. As this form of analysis is 'data driven' (Varpio et al., 2020), codes and themes are derived directly from the data set and related more closely to participants' accounts and interpretations. Moreover, this granted an openness towards the development of emerging themes and phenomena in the data and allowed me to identify features of asexuality that extended beyond my prior knowledge of the area. As a result, codes and themes generated in this study were not assigned to pre-existing categories or theoretical frameworks already identified in previous studies included in this thesis.

Moreover, as I identified themes at their surface level, my analysis focused primarily on the semantic or 'explicit' meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process progressed from description and summary of participants' accounts to the identification of significance and meaning behind trends in the themes produced.

Defining Codes and Themes

According to Boyatzis (1998), codes developed within a thematic analysis should encapsulate the phenomena present in the research and describe the extent of the data. To achieve this, my development of initial codes derived directly from the open-ended questionnaire responses and remained close to participants' accounts. When completing my analysis, I assigned words or short phrases to each passage and later developed this into meaningful codes that described the sentiments present in the data. When moving to the next stage of my analysis, I conceptualised a theme as something which captured an important aspect of the data and portrayed a patterned response or recurring sentiment (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, when identifying a theme, I did not consider the prevalence of that theme as a defining quality for its existence but rather, the significance that the theme held in accurately and effectively describing participants' accounts.

Data Analysis

As I collected data using a self-completed, open-ended questionnaire, I was unable to engage in traditional forms of data familiarisation. This meant that when I began my analysis, I lacked initial interpretations that are typically achieved through the interview process. As a result, it was important that I immersed myself in the data through means of active and repeated reading of questionnaire responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, during this phase of analysis I made preliminary notes

and engaged in a reflective process that marked the beginning of my coding procedure.

As this research aimed to extend upon my understanding of asexual identity development and internalisation, my analysis was inductive in nature. Thus, I coded all elements of the data that encapsulated some aspects of the participants' responses in a line-by-line manner. These codes identified features of the data that appeared relevant to participants' accounts and ensured that the most basic elements of the raw data were assessed in a meaningful way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As mentioned previously, this process was 'data driven' and adhered to the semantic form of interpretation chosen for this research. I coded the data manually and presented initial codes in the form of a columned table with verbatim extracts in the far left-hand column and associated codes in the resulting columns. Once this initial coding was completed, I compared codes and modified accordingly.

Once data were coded and collated for all participants' responses, I organised codes into categories that represented potential themes. All relevant extracts accompanied these themes to confirm their relevance and applicability across participants. This amalgamation of codes allowed me to form themes that identified specific phenomena in the data and portrayed some aspect of asexual identity development and internalisation. A table of codes and resulting themes acted as a visual representation to guide my analysis, display interpretations and describe patterns that were relevant to the research question.

When reviewing themes, I decided whether they were supported with enough data to describe phenomena in a meaningful and coherent way and ensured that there were clear and identifiable distinctions between each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin, I reviewed the structure of each theme at the coding level and considered

how patterns emerged with accompanying data extracts. I then moved to the second phase of the review process whereby I considered whether the theme was problematic, or if it would fit better in another theme or group of themes. Again, I reviewed the theme structure at the coding level and supported my decision with reference to codes and data extracts. Once I considered all themes to fit within a pattern, I generated a thematic map to identify relationships between themes and to determine the level or significance of each theme. Following this, I reviewed the structure of themes in relation to all data gathered in the study. During this phase, I re-read my entire dataset to determine the accuracy of themes, the structure of thematic maps and to identify any additional themes missed within my initial analysis. Once this phase was complete, I had a comprehensive understanding of the structure of my themes as well as how they represented findings in the data.

Once I confirmed the structure of themes, I then decided the 'essence' of each theme and allocated a name which best described that theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I accompanied each individual theme with a detailed analysis that outlined its story and how it contributed to the overall research. This involved the description of larger themes as well as how smaller sub-themes combined to form its structure.

6.5 Intersectionality Analysis

Employing an intersectional framework within qualitative analysis allows researchers to better understand their population of interest within a social context and interpret group differences from a socio-structural perspective (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Syed, 2010; Windsong, 2018). Intersectionality is defined in the current research as a method to investigate how 'power relations' (i.e., the attributes that an individual has which impacts the behaviour of others) effect their societal

relations, as well as individual experiences. This definition, which has been derived from the work of Collins et al., (2021), posits that intersectionality may be used an analytical tool to position categories such as race, gender and sexuality as interrelated and collectively forging one another. To this end, intersectionality is understood as a way to explain the complexity of the world, as well as shared and individual human experiences.

As a robust analytical approach to better understanding the relationship between socially-constructed identities (Abrams et al., 2020), intersectionality is becoming increasingly prevalent when examining gender, race, sexuality and other forms of social categories (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). Moreover, intersectionality theory may be used to examine differences among marginalised groups (Christensen & Jensen, 2012) through "the implementation of research methods that capture the lived and multifaceted experience of individuals at the crossroads of oppressed identities and social positions" (Abrams et al., 2020, p. 1). Thus, the presence of diverse gender and romantic identities in the asexual community encouraged me to later consider my findings through an intersectional lens. This allowed me to examine the personal and societal factors that contribute towards the development of an asexual identity, as well as commonalities and discrepancies that exist across participants' accounts. Moreover, this provided insight into how participants' interconnected identities interact in the context of an allonormative and heteronormative society to create unique experiences of marginalisation and oppression.

Although the inductive nature of this research did not require a guiding theory during study conceptualisation and participant recruitment, I later incorporated an intersectional framework within my data analysis and reporting of

findings. This involved taking into account differences and commonalities that were specific to participants' gender and romantic identities, as well as how these intersecting or "overlapping" identities contribute towards the complexity of their experiences. This aligned with the exploratory qualities of my research and minimised bias during data collection and my initial interpretation of results (Abrams et al., 2020). Moreover, returning to my data with an intersectional lens contributed towards the iterative nature of this research and allowed me to examine participants' experiences at a broader contextual level. To effectively carry out my analysis, I kept several key features of intersectionality theory in mind. This included an awareness that participants have multiple identities that converge at some level, and within each identity lies an element of power or oppression. Moreover, I maintained the belief that these identities are created within socio-cultural contexts and are, as a result, mutable or variable (Abrams et al., 2020; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). To ensure that my findings were reported accurately, I presented themes in relation to both the overall sample and specific sub-identities and took care not to over or under-emphasise the differences between groups.

6.6 Chapter Summary

I begin this study by reviewing the literature surrounding asexual identity development and focusing on the heterogeneity of the asexual population. I then outline the research methodology including participant demographics, research design, recruitment procedures and data collection. This is followed by a description of intersectionality theory and how this has been employed in my analysis. I then identify the four major themes generated in this study and discuss the theoretical implications of each in turn.

The themes presented in this study align closely with the processes of identity development outlined in studies one and two. For example, discovery of the asexual orientation and identification as asexual was shown to be a common experience among participants, irrespective of their gender or romantic identity. Moreover, perceived stigmatisation and dismissal of participants' asexual identities corresponds with the role of allonormativity and the assumption that all people should experience sexual attraction regardless of their gender or romantic identity. Similar to findings from study two, the relationships that participants desired were dependent on their romantic identities, with romantic identified asexuals being more open to the possibility of a sexual relationship with a non-asexual partner. Moreover, the inclusion of male participants allowed me to uncover discrepancies across gender. For example, gender appeared to influence reactions to participants' asexual identities, with female participants experiencing greater pressure to have sex as well as conflict surrounding their choice to not pursue a traditional family. On the other hand, male participants described incidences where other people doubted the legitimacy of their asexuality and questioned their masculinity due to their lack of sexual attraction.

In completing this study, I extend upon findings presented in studies one and two and address my previous recommendation to verify the experiences of asexual individuals, with an added focus on the heterogeneity of this group. In doing this, I provide evidence of variations in asexual peoples' identity development that are specific to their sexual, romantic and gender identities. Through a focus on the diverse nature of the asexual community, this research provides a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of asexual people and contributes

towards the final stage of this research in which I develop a robust and psychometrically sound measure.

Chapter 7 Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis (Study 3)

Sinéad Kelleher, University College Cork

Mike Murphy, University College Cork

This chapter is an exact copy of the journal paper referred to above.

7.1 Abstract

This study aimed to identify components of asexual identity development and internalisation in the context of an allonormative society, with an added focus on the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities. 99 participants between the ages of 18 and 72 (M = 27.97, SD = 10.36) completed an open-ended questionnaire which was analysed using thematic analysis. Four major themes were identified: being asexual; becoming asexual; intimate social expression; and internalisation. Findings suggest that the process of discovering asexuality and identifying with the asexual community is a common experience among asexuals, and is not dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity. Moreover, the negative ways in which many participants understand their lack of sexual attraction may be related to allonormativity and the internalisation of negative attitudes towards asexuality. However, participants' approach to disclosure and relationships, as well as their willingness to openly express their asexuality appeared to be dependent upon their gender identities and the nature of their desired relationships. Romantic-identified participants typically sought emotional intimacy and considered their asexuality to

hinder their relationships, and female participants experienced greater sexual coercion when coming out. The theoretical implications of each theme within asexual identity development and internalisation are discussed.

Keywords: *Asexuality, Identity Development, Internalisation, Thematic Analysis, Allonormativity*

7.2 Introduction

Asexuality may be defined as when an individual identifies as asexual and describes an "absence of sexual attraction" directed towards others (Brunning & McKeever, 2021, p. 498; Catri, 2021). The asexual community and those identifying as asexual are in receipt of increasing academic attention and are becoming more recognised within popular culture (Catri, 2021; Mollet, 2020).

The asexual population is considered heterogenous with a variety of sexual (e.g., gray-asexual, demi-sexual) and romantic (e.g., aromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic) identities witnessed among asexual individuals, as well as diverse gender identities and varying attitudes towards sex and relationships (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Brunning & McKeever, 2021). Because of this, asexuality is believed to exist along a spectrum (Hammack et al., 2019) with some asexual individuals experiencing varying levels of sexual arousal and romantic attraction towards others (Bogaert, 2006; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015).

7.2.1 *Asexual Identity Development*

The development of an individual's sexual identity involves an awareness of the desires, behaviours and attractions that correspond with their sexual orientation (Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2011). For non-heterosexual individuals, this

typically involves a process of self-questioning and engaging in non-heterosexual social and sexual activities (Cass, 1979), and may result in identity acceptance and disclosure to others (Rosario et al., 2006; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Moreover, sexual identity development may be influenced by both social and cultural factors, with individual components, such as age and gender, as well as group membership essential to this process (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Similar to other non-heterosexual identities, the development of an individual's asexual identity typically begins through an awareness of the self as different from their peers (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mollet, 2020). Moreover, the role of online forums within asexual identity development (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016) corresponds with other models of non-heterosexual identity development in which the internet is considered a space to develop a positive sense of self and connect with similar others (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Harper et al., 2016; Pingel et al., 2013). There are, however, many elements specific to asexual identity development that may not occur within other sexual minority groups (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, a general lack of information surrounding asexuality may impede identity development and cause some asexuals to question the legitimacy of their asexuality and pathologise their lack of sexual attraction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, the hidden nature of asexuality requires active searching (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), with disclosure considered imperative to identity development and the acceptance of a lack of sexual attraction (Robbins et al., 2016).

7.2.2 *The Role of Heteronormativity and Allonormativity within Identity Development*

Within the context of a heteronormative society, the development of a non-heterosexual identity has many implications for sexual minority individuals. Specifically, stigmatisation and marginalisation have been shown to heighten distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Mayer et al., 2014; Wright & Perry, 2006), including those who identify as asexual (Lucassen et al., 2011; McInroy et al., 2020; Yule et al., 2013). Moreover, allonormativity, or the assumption that all people experience sexual attraction, has been shown to hinder the development of asexual identities, with many asexual individuals experiencing dismissal, denial and prejudice (Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Mollet, 2020). The presence of these heteronormative and allonormative ideals may instil a negative understanding of asexuality, with some asexual individuals considering sexual attraction as required (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; McInroy et al., 2020; Mollet, 2020) or internalise negative stereotypes such as sexual repression or pathology (Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). Moreover, discrimination and denial have been linked to increased mental health difficulties and interpersonal problems among asexual individuals (Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013), and may be detrimental to the development of their positive self-concepts (Chasin, 2015).

Research suggests that asexual identity development and internalisation are not identical across asexual people (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019) and may be influenced by other dimensions of identity such as gender and romantic attractions (Cuthbert, 2019). Specifically, asexual individuals' departure from societally expected gender roles and expressions may hinder their positive self-perceptions in

ways that are dependent upon their preferred gender identities. For example, while female participants' asexuality is often dismissed as female sexual passivity (Haefner, 2011; Vares, 2018), male participants are more likely to experience unbelief surrounding their lack of sexual attraction through an assumption of males being inherently sexual (Vares, 2018). Moreover, asexual individuals' management of relationships and the types of relationships that they desire may be influenced by their romantic identities. This is seen within research whereby aromantic asexuals typically seek companionship without an element of sexual or romantic attraction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), while romantic asexuals often desire relationships similar to an allosexual partnership, with some willing to engage in mild forms of sexual activity (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). Moreover, research suggests that participants' approach to disclosure may be subject to their romantic identities with romantic asexuals placing greater emphasis on the need to disclose their lack of sexual attraction to a partner (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

Despite a growth in research surrounding asexuality (Mollet, 2020), further research is required to better understand the development of an asexual identity within the context of a heteronormative (Morgan, 2013) and allonormative (Mollet, 2020, 2021) society, and the implications that this may have for asexual individuals' well-being. Moreover, while there is increasing evidence for the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities within identity development (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), this has yet to be comprehensively investigated (Scherrer, 2008).

Thus, research focusing on the heterogeneity of this population may contribute towards a more inclusive and scoping insight into asexual identity development and the complexity of this experience (Antonsen et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Robbins et al., 2016). Through a thematic analysis of reports of self-identified asexual individuals, this research explores and extends our knowledge of the personal and societal factors that inform the development and internalisation of an asexual identity.

7.3 Method

7.3.1 *Participants*

Ninety-nine participants between the ages of 18 and 72 (M = 27.97, SD = 10.36) completed the questionnaire. Inclusion criteria included participants who were eighteen years or over, identified as asexual or along the asexual spectrum and reported a lack of sexual attraction. Participants identified as predominantly female (*N* = 61), non-binary (*N* = 14) and male (*N* = 10), with the remaining opting to self-describe (*N* = 14). The majority of participants self-identified as asexual (*N* = 79) or gray-asexual (*N* = 13) and several identified as demi-sexual (*N* = 4) or chose to self-describe (*N* = 3). For romantic orientation, there were a range of responses including aromantic (*N* = 32), heteroromantic (*N* = 21), gray-romantic (*N* = 12), pan-romantic (*N* = 11) and biromantic (*N* = 10), with the remaining choosing to self-describe (*N* = 13) (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Participant Characteristics

	Total (*N* = 99)
Age: Mean (SD)	27.97(10.36)

Gender Identity	(%)
Female	60.39
Male	9.9
Non-binary (third gender)	13.86
Self-describe	7.92
Female Self-describe	2.97
Non-binary (third gender) Self-describe	0.99
Transman, Non-binary (third gender)	0.99
Male, Non-binary (third gender)	0.99
Sexual Identity	(%)
Asexual	78.21
Gray-asexual	12.87
Demi-sexual	3.96
Self-describe	2.97
Romantic Identity	(%)
Aromantic	31.68
Heteroromantic	20.79
Gray-romantic	11.88
Pan-romantic	10.89
Self-describe	9.9
Biromantic	8.91
Demi-romantic	1.98
Homoromantic	1.98

Non-binary (third gender): An individual who identifies with more than one gender, no gender (agender) or are genderfluid. **Asexual:** An individual who lacks

sexual attraction towards other people. **Gray-asexual:** An individual who feels vague and infrequent sexual attraction. **Demi-sexual:** An individual who feel no sexual attraction towards other people unless a strong emotional bond has been established. **Heteroromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with the opposite gender. **Homoromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with the same gender. **Biromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with multiple genders. **Panromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships without gender being a factor. **Aromantic:** An individual who is not romantically attracted to or desiring of romantic relationships at all. **Gray-romantic:** An individual who experiences romantic attraction but not very often. **Demi-romantic:** An individual who experiences romantic attraction after developing an emotional connection.

7.3.2 *Research Design*

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical approach as it allows researchers to identify, analyse and report themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that portray differences and similarities across participants' accounts (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, as thematic analysis encourages researchers to take a structured approach to data handling, it is particularly useful when analysing large data sets and producing a coherent final report (King, 2004). These features of thematic analysis are suitable to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' attitudes, experiences and beliefs (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Creswell, 2009) and are therefore consistent with the overarching aims of this research. Patterns within the data will be identified using an inductive or "bottom-up" approach whereby themes

are produced directly from the raw data (Patton, 1990) and are independent of any particular interest or topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, codes and themes generated within this research will not be forcibly assigned to pre-existing categories or theoretical frameworks already identified within the area of asexual internalisation and identity development. Moreover, the analysis will focus primarily on the semantic or a 'explicit' meaning of data and researchers will identify themes at their surface level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process will progress from description and summary of the data to the identification of significance and meaning behind trends in the themes produced.

An online open-ended questionnaire completed by asexual individuals was used to gather data. This was a particularly cost and time efficient approach to data collection and granted greater coverage of features such as age, gender, romantic and sexual identities. As online questionnaires ask questions in a standardised way, this contributed towards pattern-based analysis of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the anonymous nature of the self-completed questionnaire facilitated greater participant honesty and prevented interviewer bias (Emde & Fuchs, 2012).

7.3.3 *Recruitment Procedures*

Participants were recruited through the online resource the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) during January and February of 2021. AVEN is a forum dedicated to creating awareness of asexuality, growing the asexual community, as well as providing information on what it means to be asexual. An announcement detailing the research and researcher contact information was posted to a discussion board on the AVEN website. Ethical approval was received from the

institutional review board and permission to post this research on the AVEN website was received from the AVEN Project Team. Once participants had completed the questionnaire, they were provided with links to AVEN and other forms of support available to the asexual community. Participants were not compensated. Although 145 participants completed the questionnaire, 46 entries were removed as they partially completed the open-ended questionnaire or were under 18 years of age. The relatively large sample size of 99 participants was not predetermined prior to data gathering, but rather, was a result of the high response rate gained when the questionnaire was released online. While researchers were aware that "bigger" sample sizes are "not necessarily better" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 741), they felt that it was appropriate to honour all participants' accounts and include them within the analysis.

7.3.4 *Data Collection*

An online open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data for this research (Appendix III). The questionnaire took participants on average 25 minutes to complete. Questions were phrased openly and were informed by our current understanding of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation. To ensure effective data collection and enhance the quality and extent of participants' responses, researchers adhered to guidelines provided by Emde and Fuchs (2012). Specifically, researchers used dynamic entry boxes within the questionnaire to encourage elaboration and minimise item-non-response, or missing data. Moreover, to ensure that relevant answers were obtained, questions were designed to be unambiguous, simple to interpret and related to the aims of the overall research question (Jain et al., 2016). This was achieved through

review and several revisions carried out by the research team. Examples of questions include “how do you express your asexuality?”, “does being asexual make you feel different in any way?” and “have you told other people about your sexual orientation?”.

7.4 Analysis

7.4.1 *Data Analytic Strategy*

We began our analysis by immersing ourselves within the data through means of active and repeated reading, as well as making preliminary notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then coded all elements of the data that represented some aspects of participants’ responses in a line-by-line manner. Once data were coded and collated for all participants’ responses, we organised codes into groups that represented potential themes. We then reviewed the structure of each theme at the coding level and formed themes with accompanying data extracts. Once we were satisfied that the ‘candidate themes’ adequately represented the coded data, we developed candidate theme maps to identify relationships between themes and to decipher the significance, or hierarchy, of each theme. We then considered the validity of themes in relation to the entire data set and whether theme maps reflected the meaning and sentiments present within the data. This involved a process of reading and re-reading the entire data set multiple times to determine the accuracy of themes, the structure of thematic maps and to identify any additional themes missed within the initial analysis. Once the structure of themes was accepted, the ‘essence’ of each theme was decided, and a name was allocated to best describe that theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Table 7.2 for a list of major themes and sub-themes.

Table 7.2 List of Major Themes and Sub-themes

Becoming Asexual
Feeling Different
Searching for Sexual Identity
Means of Discovery
Being Asexual
Identifying as Asexual
Asexual Community
Displaying Pride
Intimate Social Expression
Desires within Relationships
Asexuality Compromising Relationships
Avoiding Sexual/romantic Relationships
Reactions to Disclosure
Fearing Disclosure
Selective Disclosure
Internalisation
I Feel Alien
I am seen as Alien

7.4.2 *Intersectionality Analysis*

The presence of diverse gender and romantic identities brought us to later consider our findings through an intersectional lens. Although the inductive nature of this research did not require a guiding theory during study conceptualisation and participant recruitment, we later incorporated an intersectional framework within our

data analysis and reporting of findings. This allowed us to examine the interconnection of socially constructed identities and how this may shape the experiences and meaning making processes of participants (Abrams et al., 2020). Utilising an intersectional framework within the reading of our data allowed us to identify commonalities and differences across participants' accounts that appeared specific to their romantic and gender identities. This in turn allowed us to observe how gender roles and romantic identities may intersect within the development of an asexual identity and further illustrates the complexity of this experience. We present evidence of this within the results section, and specifically through our analysis of intimate social expressions.

7.4.3 *Methodological Integrity*

Several measures were taken to ensure the credibility and reliability of emerging codes and themes. This included reflexive journaling (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999) and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as well as record keeping of raw data and theme formation (Halpern, 1983). The authors, both of whom have extensive training in qualitative research and multiple published articles, carried out peer debriefing to resolve any conflicting analyses and enhance credibility of the overall findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed researchers to move repeatedly between phases of analysis to facilitate interpretation and the development of themes that adequately represent the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All themes presented within this research are supported by verbatim extracts.

7.5 Results

Following thematic analysis, four major themes were generated: being asexual; becoming asexual; intimate social expression; and internalisation. These themes were apparent throughout all participants' accounts.

7.5.1 *Becoming Asexual*

The theme 'becoming asexual' is composed of several sub-themes that, when combined, detail how an awareness of the self as different caused many participants to search for their sexual identity. This includes feeling different, searching for sexual identity and means of discovery. This process of discovering an asexual identity appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon age, gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity.

Feeling Different

An awareness of the self as different from others typically initiated the discovery of participants' sexual identity. According to participants, their lack of sexual attraction caused them to feel "abnormal", "disconnected" and "different" from their peers and this brought them to search for an explanation. For example, one participant described feeling "weird" as they had never "actively desired" sex (Aromantic asexual female, 23) while another "had no idea what the hype was about" and "never got crushes" unlike their "sex obsessed classmates" (Asexual gray-romantic female, 24). This sense of being different appeared to be most salient when participants were exposed to conversations surrounding sex as they felt that they couldn't comprehend (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21) or "didn't connect"

with what their friends felt (Asexual, unsure/still questioning romantic identity female, 27).

> When I turned 25, I realized I had *never dated* and it finally dawned on me that that was *really weird* because I had run out of excuses like "I'm too busy with work/school". I realized dating had never been a priority for me. If it had been a priority. I would have found a way to make it work… So, after realizing I was 25 and had never dated and that was weird, I literally googled "25 and never dated" (Asexual aromantic agender, 31)

Searching for Sexual Identity

Following an awareness of the self as different from others, several participants explored the possibility of other sexual identities such as homosexuality and bisexuality, before eventually uncovering asexuality. For example, one participant initially considered themselves as "bi or pan" and described coming out to others as "not straight, probably bi, but I don't really know" before eventually identifying as asexual (Asexual panromantic female, 19). Another participant recalled how their biromantic and demisexual identities had caused them to be "constantly confused" and question whether they may be "gay" or "ace" before eventually realising that they "could be both" (Demisexual biromantic female, 27).

> I thought I was a lesbian or bisexual, even though I had great difficulties even imagining having sex (and I was too repulsed by nudity and sex to go online and "do some research" on what sex looks like). Eventually I gave up on the idea of being lesbian or bisexual and slowly came to terms with my asexuality (Asexual still-questioning female, 22)

Many participants' past attempts to engage in sexual activity led them to confirm or realise their lack of sexual attraction and discover their asexual identities. For example, one participant recalled that they "haven't had sex since the first time" because it wasn't an "enjoyable" experience (Demisexual demiromantic female, 20), while others recalled that they had "tried sex and disliked it" (Asexual aromantic female, 26) or were "repulsed and couldn't go through with it" (Asexual aromantic male, 26). Moreover, some participants recognised their lack of sexual attraction while in a relationship as they had "so much trouble having sex with (their) spouse" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 42), or were informed by their partner of their lack of sexual attraction; "You know you're not gay, right? You're asexual."" (Asexual quoiromantic female, 34).

> I tried several times over many years to have good sex, but they were all unimpressive experiences. It took a lot of convincing myself to not blame it on something else before I researched asexuality (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37)

Most participants described actively researching their lack of sexual attraction prior to becoming aware of the term asexuality. This involved "googling" a lack of sexual attraction on the internet, with the majority "eventually ending up on AVEN" (asexual aromantic female, 23). For example, one participant "googled "25 and never dated"" (Asexual aromantic agender, 31) while another "looked up online different orientations" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26) that led them to asexuality.

> I did research on the sexuality by watching YouTube videos and reading internet articles. I had a feeling that something was wrong/different as early as 11, as I noticed that other children had crushes and liked to talk about "cute" boys or girls. At 17 or 18, I had still not experienced a crush and started to realize that I might never feel sexual attraction or want sex. I then learned the word asexual from a single video I found online (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Means of Discovery

Participants identified the “internet”, “YouTube videos” (Autochorissexual quoiromantic male, 25) and “online communities” (Asexual aromantic female, 21) as particularly useful sources of information when discovering their asexual identities. Moreover, several participants discovered asexuality by reading “articles” (Asexual biromantic male, 32) and “fanfiction with asexual characters” (Asexual gray-romantic female, 25), as well as seeing “ace discourse on Tumblr” (Asexual aromantic unsure, 22) and “TV shows” with asexual characters (Asexual aromantic male, 44).

> After a YouTube video of AufKlo (a German channel creating information videos) mentioning AVEN. There I read about it and educated myself further while realizing that there were always signs (Asexual panromantic non-binary, 20)

Online communities provided participants with an opportunity to further explore and define their identities. For example, AVEN gave participants the opportunity to “read discussions on the forum”, “ask questions” and “private message other asexuals” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50). Specifically,

participants described AVEN as a "a community of people who understood" their sexual and romantic identities (Asexual aromantic female, 54) and provided them with a "rich vocabulary" to "redefine" their lack of sexual attraction (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24).

> I always felt kind of left out between my peers because of a lack of interest in romance and sex related topics. When I was 20 I stumbled upon the definition of asexuality and aromanticism while looking for something LGBTQ+ related. It kind of immediately clicked that those terms kind of suit me (Asexual aromantic female, 23)

Moreover, several participants discovered asexuality through means of friends' and partners' suggestions (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27) while others were introduced to asexuality by their psychiatrist (Gray-asexual aromantic male, 40) or therapist (Asexual heteroromantic female, 42). Moreover, a few participants described "stumbling" upon the term by chance.

7.5.2 *Being Asexual*

The major theme 'being asexual' is composed of several subthemes that underlie participants' understanding of their asexual identities. This includes identifying with an asexual identity, the role of the asexual community and displaying pride. The ways in which participants identified as asexual was not dependent upon a specific age, gender, or romantic identity.

Identifying as Asexual

Participants described how they came to identify as asexual or along the asexual spectrum, and how this allowed them to better understand their lack of sexual attraction. For example, many participants recalled that their sexuality "suddenly made sense" and allowed them to accept their differences and for some, positively impacted their self-esteem. For those who identified as asexual, it was evident that the term "resonated" with them and allowed them to adopt an asexual identity. For example, one participant recalled that their "life immediately made a lot more sense" following their identification as asexual (Asexual aromantic female, 35), while others "identified strongly with the label" (Asexual aromantic female, 54). For some participants, this identification as asexual was immediate as it "instantly just made sense" (Asexual aromantic male, 26) and "described" them well (Asexual heteroromantic female, 72). Equally, participants who identified along the asexual spectrum (i.e., gray-asexual, demi-sexual, autochorissexual) considered the term asexual as "the most accurate orientation label" to describe their sexual identity (Gray-asexual grayromantic non-binary, 21) and felt that it encompassed "a wide range of sexual orientations, all of which have in common the complete lack of desire to engage in sexual intercourse" (Gray asexual aromantic male, 40).

> Finding out that asexuality existed came like a revelation that explained so much, and everything seemed to fall into place (Asexual quioromantic genderqueer, 33)

Identifying with an asexual identity allowed many participants to develop a more positive self-concept and better understand why they don't experience sexual attraction. For example, one participant described their identification as asexual as a "lightbulb moment" that "completely changed" how they saw themselves (Asexual

aromantic agender, 31), while another considered this a “word for how (they) feel” and “not a me-thing” (Asexual, still questioning non-binary, 19).

> I first heard the term “asexual” online, but I knew that I felt “different” from my heterosexual peers before that. Discovering that word allowed me to address what I felt internally and helped me to understand that I didn’t experience sexual attraction (Gray-asexual aromantic non-binary, 20)

Moreover, identification as asexual led to a sense of relief among several participants as they no longer needed to “fake” being sexual and felt less guilty about their lack of sexual attraction.

> My knowing I'm asexual makes me feel different because I no longer feel bad about not feeling sexually attracted to people. I no longer feel like I have to fake thinking a shirtless dude is "hot" (Asexual biromantic female, 25).

Asexual Community

For many participants, the presence of an asexual community enhanced their identification as asexual and allowed them to better understand their lack of sexual attraction.

> I stumbled across the term online and didn't know what it means, so I looked it up and found AVEN. I could immediately relate to how they described asexuality…The discovery of AVEN allowed me to redefine a (sexless) relationship I was in at the time as a romantic one (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24)

AVEN exposed participants to “a community of people who understood” their sexual and romantic identities (asexual aromantic female, 54) and participants felt “grateful for the rich vocabulary to describe types of attraction that exists within the asexual community” (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24). Moreover, being part of an asexual community such as AVEN, granted a sense of camaraderie and allowed participants to no longer feel that their lack of sexual attraction was “defective” or “abnormal”.

> Learning about asexuality as a healthy, natural preference lead me to the realization that I didn’t have some defect I would soon need to get over in order to live a normal, fulfilling life. Identifying with the ace community has allowed me to stop feeling worried and guilty about my lack of interest in something that most of my peers consider essential to their happiness, and given me the courage to accept my difference as a positive part of my identity (Asexual quoiromantic genderqueer, 33)

Displaying Pride

Many participants described displays of pride consistent with their asexual identities. This included hanging pride flags or the colours of the asexual community, displaying artwork, writing literature and composing music related to asexuality, and identifying themselves visually by wearing ace rings on the middle finger of their right hand.

> Have taken part in Pride marches, carrying banners. Sometimes wear a Pride pin or bracelet in Pride colours. Have also knitted socks and gloves. Have also

written a novel... Post regularly but infrequently on AVEN. Follow some social media (Asexual aromantic female, 54)

Several participants expressed their pride by advocating for awareness and acceptance of asexuality within both queer and heterosexual communities. They achieved this by speaking openly about their asexuality and sharing their orientation with friends, family, partners, and the wider community.

I wear a black ring on my right middle finger. When stuck in discussions about sex, romance, or relationships, I remind people that not everyone is interested in these things and that they are not universally necessary or enjoyable... I support asexual/aspec artists and creators. I encourage and ask for the inclusion of asexuality and aromanticism in LGBT+ spaces (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21)

Several participants displayed their asexual pride through creating asexual content online and sharing their experiences on platforms such as AVEN. For example, one participant described making YouTube videos that explained asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and another shared ‘memes’ and created ‘tiktoks’ that educated others on asexuality.

I have a pride flag. I’m an ace tiktok creator (Asexual Gray-romantic non-binary, 19)

In addition to this, some participants maintained a “presence online” and supported social media accounts dedicated to raising awareness and displaying asexual pride.

> …by reposting memes about it on my stories, partly to raise awareness (Asexual bi/pan/heteroromantic non-binary, 19)

7.5.3 *Intimate Social Expression*

The major theme 'intimate social expression' details how participants navigate their relationships with others, as well as their experiences of disclosing their asexual identities. Sub-themes include desires within relationships; asexuality compromising relationships; avoiding sexual/romantic relationships; reactions to disclosure; fearing disclosure; and selective disclosure. Participants' desired relationships appeared to be dependent upon their romantic identities and ranged from purely platonic and familial relationships to queer-platonic and romantic relationships. Moreover, while many romantic-identified participants expressed a desire to engage in relationships with a romantic element, the majority of participants emphasised the non-sexual nature of their relationships, irrespective of romantic identities. When disclosing their identities, participants' experiences ranged from positive to negative and as a result, shaped their approach to disclosure and willingness to disclose in the future. Despite the presence of some discrepancies, participants' experiences of disclosing their asexual identities did not appear to be dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity.

Desires within Relationships

When forming their relationships, participants expressed a desire for "commitment" and "closeness" that "does not take a sexual form". Although the nature of their desired relationships differed across participants, many sought "support" and "respect", and some "intimacy" and "affection".

> I would like and have always wanted a husband! i.e., a fully loving, affectionate, close partnership/marriage; someone to share life, love & affection; someone to plan holidays with; someone with whom to remain even when one of us moves in life. All the 'normal' stuff in other words - just without sex (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50)

Most participants' desired relationships differed depending on their romantic identities. For example, aromantic participants typically sought "close friendships" without the concern of developing romantic feelings (Asexual aromantic third-gender, 37) and a relationship with a "significant other" that "is much closer to platonic than romantic" (Aromantic asexual male, 26). Moreover, an openness towards queer platonic relationships (QPR) appeared consistently throughout aromantic participants' responses.

> Since I am also aromantic, I can't really imagine myself in a romantic relationship. It would be ideal to live either on my own or possibly with a partner who I could trust not to be attracted to me romantically and sexually, or at least not acting on those feelings and not making me feel guilty for not feeling the same way about them (asexual aromantic female, 23)

However, this desire for a QPR was not exclusive to aromantic participants with several romantic-identified participants also mentioning the possibility of engaging in a QPR.

> I want close friendships and would also be open to a queer platonic relationship. I have no desire to be in a sexual relationship with anyone. My ideal relationship

would be a group of friends living together and supporting each other (Asexual demiromantic female, 21)

Moreover, like aromantic participants, several romantic-identified participants did not require a romantic element within their relationships and sought "friendships mainly" (Asexual biromantic non-binary, 21), or were "very happy in living a solitary life" (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21).

I want an exclusive best friend. Someone with a strong degree of independence from me, where we active choose to spend time and support each other - but with a degree of physical closeness greater than best friends. Take a healthy, functional relationship, and subtract the sex (Asexual heteroromantic male, 23)

Many participants with romantic identities described elements of a stereotypical relationship in which they would cohabit with their partner and share interests and hobbies such as "cooking", "watching movies" and holidaying together. Unlike aromantic participants, romantic identified participants typically desired "something romantic, close and intimate" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26) and someone to "share (their) life with" (Asexual panromantic female, 19).

I would like to have a life partner one day. To me, that means a person that I could live with for the rest of my life, cook with, share a bed, spend holidays together, and do other married couple things with. The only difference is that we would not have sex or do sexual activities. I have heard of queer-platonic relationships: I would be very open to one, though I think I would like a male romantic partner more (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Moreover, several romantic identified participants revealed that they were willing to engage in sexual activity with a partner and explained this through a desire to foster “intimacy” and “closeness”, as well as maintain their relationships. Many expressed the importance of compromising to fulfil their partners’ sexual needs, with some enjoying sexual activity upon the presence of “trust” and “respect”.

> My partner is allosexual. He wants sex, and I usually don't mind it. I just don’t actively crave it. It can be enjoyable sometimes and it makes him feel more connected to me. It's a way to show my partner I love him (Asexual Quoiromantic female, 34)

Asexuality Compromising Relationships

Participants who sought to engage in committed or romantic relationships described how their lack of sexual attraction acted to hinder or “compromise” those relationships. For example, one participant recalled that their “differing libido with partners” caused “friction” and was a source of “conflict” within a past relationship (Asexual heteroromantic male, 23), while another questioned the feasibility of finding a “compatible partner” through the belief that “sex is such an important part of a relationship for the vast majority of people” (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27). Moreover, several participants described feeling “lonely”, left out” and a “disappointment” within relationships (Asexual biromantic non-binary, 28) and felt that others would be unwilling to follow their “emotional and sexual journey” (Gray-asexual biromantic non-binary, 28).

> Incompatibility with non-asexuals has a huge influence on any potential relationships, and even in those that work well, it is still a source of conflict.

> Sacrifices and compromises have to be made by both parties for sexual-asexual relationships to work, and I still struggle with that. It's also hard to not desire a partner the way they want to be desired. Even though I can't help it and can't change that, partners can still feel self-conscious and un-wanted (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27)

Avoiding Sexual/Romantic Relationships

Despite a desire for a committed relationship, several romantic-identified participants chose not to pursue romantic or sexual relationships and actively avoided dating. They achieved this by rejecting romantic advances and distancing themselves from romantic and sexual partners.

> I pushed them away and tried to keep them distant (Asexual heteroromantic female, 24)

Their reasons for avoiding romantic relationships appeared to stem from a fear that others would be unable to understand their lack of sexual attraction as well as an awareness of "how much society values sex" (Asexual panromantic female, 22). For example, one participant believed that a relationship with a heterosexual person would require "a lot more emotional work" (Demi-sexual heteroromantic female, 27), while another feared that their partner would consider them "broken" (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 20).

> I tend to avoid 'dating' since the question or expectation of sex seems to lurk in the background and I don't want to deal with the hassle of avoiding or rejecting that… so it's easier to not date at all (Demisexual biromantic female, 43)

Reactions to Disclosure

The theme reactions to disclosure details the various ways that others responded to the disclosure of participants' asexual identities. This ranged from negative to positive and for some, indifferent and unsurprised. For example, many participants recalled past disclosure of their asexual identity as "negative" and experienced "rejection" and "disapproval". Specifically, participants described others as "dismissing" and "doubting" their asexuality, with some attempting to "fix" or "invalidate" their lack of sexual attraction.

> The only other person I've told (after my therapist) was a man who was interested in me and he couldn't understand it. Kept asking questions (which is a good thing) but still was trying to fix me. The tension which ensued eventually lead to a blow up and the end of things (which is very sad because we had been good friends before) (Asexual heteroromantic female, 72)

This rejection was apparent through others' "disbelief" and consideration of participants as "late bloomer(s)", "prude(s)", and that their lack of sexual attraction was "temporary", or a phase. For example, one participant recalled that they were "looked down upon as prude" and "not mature enough" (Asexual aromantic female, 23), while another was considered "strange" "inhuman", "cold" and "like a robot" that "did not need love" (Asexual gray-romantic male, 36).

> I have only told ten people in my life. Most responses have unfortunately been negative. A lot of, "Don't worry, you're just a late bloomer," "You're just a prude," and, "Wow, that sucks for you." It seems like people want to convince me that I must secretly be miserable (Asexual aromantic female, 25)

Many participants recalled negative consequences that followed the disclosure of their asexual identities. For example, several participants considered others' reactions as "hostile", "hurtful" and "emotionally traumatic" (Asexual, aromantic agender, 31), with one participant having "lost friends" when coming out (Asexual, panromantic non-binary, 20).

> had a negative experience coming out to my family and if that situation repeated itself with a friend I think it would take me a long time to recover from that... My experience is obviously not comparable to a teenager being kicked out of their house and abandoned by their adult guardians, but my coming out experience was emotionally traumatic for me (Asexual aromantic agender, 31)

Moreover, several participants described others' assumptions of "trauma" and a consideration of their lack of sexual attraction as "defective" or pathological when coming out. For example, one participant was assumed to be "raped or traumatised to not want sex" and asked if there was "something wrong" with them "psychologically" (Asexual Heteroromantic female, 21), while others received "a lot of questions about possible trauma" (Asexual aromantic male, 26) or "sexual assault" (Asexual panromantic/aromantic non-binary, 21).

> I have told a few people. I told my mom, who initially told me I was not asexual and that I was just a late bloomer. She insisted that I would want sex later and claimed she had experienced the same thing. She then thought I must have been raped or traumatized to not want sex (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Many participants were assumed to be "just afraid of sex" and told that their lack of sexual attraction would "change over time" (Gray asexual homoromantic

female, 19). Specifically, participants described that friends would “push (them) to date” and “dismissed” their “concerns about not being sexually compatible” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21). Moreover, many were told that they lacked sexual attraction because they “hadn't actually had sex yet” and that their “opinion would change” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 34) once they “get into a relationship” and “find "the one"” (Asexual aromantic female, 22). This dismissal was not specific to female participants as several male and non-binary participants also described situations where others “questioned” or “contested” their asexuality. For example, one participant was advised that they would “change if (they) met the "right girl"” (Gray-asexual aromantic male, 40), while others were encouraged to “find the right person” (Asexual aromantic male, 26) or “the one” (Asexual aromantic male, 20).

> I did have one person say that I may not “be like this forever” which I think was supposed to be nice but it felt really patronizing, kind of like “oh you’ll grow out of it” or “you’ll figure out what’s wrong and fix it”. I don’t really want to fix it. There’s nothing wrong with me (Gray asexual, pan romantic non-binary transman, 29)

Several female participants described being “dismissed” when coming out and recalled situations where other people tried to “fix” their lack of sexual attraction or coerce them to have sex. For example, one participant recalled that “plenty of men will try to hit on me because they believe that I will want sex and be less prudish if they can convince me to have sex with them” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21), while another described how others “insist” that their asexuality is “temporary” or due to them “being a virgin” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26)

> I have had a man try to rape me to make me sexual, and I have had people think I was like a child and regularly humiliate me in public (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Participants interpreted allosexuals' negative reactions to coming out through a lack of awareness of asexuality and their inability to comprehend a lack of sexual attraction. For example, one participant stated that other people "can't picture what it's like to not feel sexual desire" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26), while another considered that people "who aren't asexual themselves don't really understand" (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21).

> Yes. Usually, it's awful. People generally don't really believe me...for most people it's like they can't wrap their heads around it. I used to be told that it was just because I hadn't actually had sex yet and my opinion would change after. It hasn't. I usually get asked all sorts of invasive questions. I've been asked if I was abused as a child (I wasn't) or if I was raped- which I did have an experience that I'd define as sexual assault following in the grand tradition of corrective rape- but I was Ace before (and after) that experience (Asexual heteroromantic female, 34)

Despite the presence of many negative accounts, several participants recalled the disclosure of their asexual identities as largely "positive" and experienced "support", "acceptance" and "understanding" from others.

> Yes, and overall, the experience has been positive. Everyone has been supportive and even if they didn't really understand what it meant, they have never tried to convince me out of it (Asexual panromantic female, 19)

These participants described the reactions of others as “proud” and “respectful”, with many applauding their openness and willingness to disclose. Again, these positive reactions did not appear to be dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity and were present across participants’ accounts.

> I am very open about my orientation, and I have gotten very positive response from the people in my life (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 20)

Interestingly, some participants described an “indifferent” or “disinterested” reaction towards the disclosure of their asexuality. For example, they recalled the experience as “undramatic”, with a lack of judgement or surprise from others.

> The friends have just gone "oh right" - straightforward acceptance/disinterest. Sibling didn't reply! But I think he probably thought nothing of it (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50)

In such situations, this led participants to not feel the need to further explain or disclose their asexuality.

> My family was pretty indifferent. No one asked me to elaborate (Asexual aromantic male, 44)

Fearing Disclosure

Many participants described a sense of fear prior to the disclosure of their asexual identities.

> I've told a few people. I only tell people who I know will be accepting, so those experiences were positive even though they were still nerve wracking (Asexual aromantic female, 22)

This was apparent through several participants' description of coming-out as "nerve-wracking" and a "scary conversation", as well as their anticipated "rejection".

> Not as of yet, because I'm afraid of being rejected, not understood or not accepted (Asexual aromantic female, 23)

Moreover, numerous participants did not express their asexuality as they feared rejection and did not feel comfortable doing so "outside of the ace community" (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37), or "LGBT+ contexts" (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24).

Selective Disclosure

Many participants were selective when disclosing their asexual identities. For example, they based their disclosure upon the "trust" that they placed in others and chose to come out at "the right time". This selective approach to disclosure appeared to derive from expected or experienced negative reactions and an attempt to minimise others' rejection of their asexual identities.

> In asexual spaces and around trusted friends, I generally express myself quite openly on the subject, though when questioned by people who aren't comfortable with LGBTQ+ issues, I avoid using labels specific to the ace community (Asexual quoiromantic genderqueer, 23)

Moreover, participants' selective approach to disclosure is also evidenced through their attempts to conceal their asexual identities from individuals who they feel may not accept their lack of sexual attraction.

> I only recently came to terms with being asexual, so I haven't told very many people. I told a couple of online friends, one of whom is also LGBTQIA+, and that wasn't very difficult because it wasn't in person and I wasn't worried about them rejecting me. I am terrified to tell my family (Asexual gray-romantic female, 22)

Several participants did not feel the need to disclose their asexual identities to others. This stemmed from a consideration of disclosure as "not relevant" and "not necessary", as they saw no benefit to coming out and rarely spoke of their asexuality with others. For example, one participant considered themselves the "same person" regardless of their sexual identity (Asexual aromantic female, 54).

> My sexual orientation is just not a part of how I view myself so I don't feel the need to share it with others (Demisexual biromantic female, 43)

7.5.4 *Internalisation*

The major theme 'internalisation' details the negative ways in which many participants understand their lack of sexual attraction. Specifically, the sub-themes 'I feel alien' and 'I am seen as alien' relate to participants' awareness of other peoples' negative understanding of asexuality and how they have internalised this. Internalising these negative sentiments was common among participants and was not dependent upon gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity.

I Feel Alien

Many participants described feeling “isolated” and “lonely” due to their disinterest in, or difficulties forming sexual and romantic relationships. This left them feeling “disconnected” from their peers and “left out” of many life events such as dating and pursing traditional familial relationships. For example, one participant described their asexuality as “very isolating” and left them feeling like a “lifelong single person” (Asexual aromantic agender, 31), while another described a sense of being “very alone” (Asexual aromantic female, 35). This feeling of being like an “outsider” or an “outcast” appeared within many participants’ accounts as they struggled to understand other people’s sexual and/or romantic attractions.

> I still feel left out sometimes, especially when my friends talk about getting married and having kids and prioritize romantic relationships over platonic ones. I don't wish I wasn't asexual but I do wish it would be more accepted and recognized (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24)

Participants’ struggle to connect and empathise with others contributed towards this sense of isolation. For example, one participant described feeling “uncomfortable” when their friends discussed “sex related topics” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 29), while others considered their asexuality to form a “major disconnect with people” (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> It's hard for me to relate to people when they discuss their sexual or romantic interests. It's hard for me to empathize with my friends when they are distressed over their partners or romantic/sexual relationships. I feel disconnected from most of culture and many things (sex ed, movies, magazine columns, etc) that

> presume I am driven by an interest in sex or romance (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21)

Moreover, participants described a sense of "missing out" on several life experiences as they watched friends "find partners", "get married" and "have kids". Again, this caused them to feel "left out" on many occasions and for one participant, "stick out as the only one who's single" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 29).

> …my friends have gotten married and are starting to have kids. So, friendship is now not a priority for anyone. That's normal, I'm aware of that. But it's hard not to feel very alone (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

A sense of confusion and a lack of information brought many participants to question their asexual identities. For example, one participant questioned whether they may be "broken" and related their lack of sexual attraction to "anxiety problems" (Asexual aromantic female, 26), while another considered whether this may be as a result of "some psychiatric problem" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> Yes, sometimes I have the feeling that I am immature compared to other allosexual friends because most allosexual people seem to equal having sex with being an adult. Sometimes I wonder if I am somehow broken or just have anxiety problems (Asexual aromantic female, 26)

This confusion and self-questioning appeared to be reinforced by limited exposure to asexuality and participants' inability to openly express their lack of sexual attraction.

> Mostly it's just been confusing and I feel like I can hardly relate to people who are driven by sexual attraction. For me, it's kind of an invisible identity. Even the people I date wouldn't be able to tell unless I told them (Asexual biromantic non-conforming, 22)

I am seen as Alien

The theme 'I am seen as alien' details other people's negative perceptions of participants' asexual identities and lack of sexual attraction. Exposure to these sentiments appeared to reinforce some participants' negative understanding of their asexuality as they experienced stigmatisation and were "ridiculed", "repressed" and treated like an "outsider". Moreover, this sense of alienation was reinforced through other people's understanding of asexuality as "cold" "unfeeling" and even "robotic", with some participants feeling "less regarded as a mature person" (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37).

> Lots of friends told me that my asexuality made me inhuman and cold. Others thought that I was like a robot and did not need love… I have always experienced a lot of confusion about romance, so I think a lot of people consider me strange and treat me as such. People in my town treat me like a social pariah because I am not getting married and having kids like my peers and they tell me that women are meant to have babies and it's wrong for women to be independent. People at college think I am repressed and prudish and can be very cruel (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

This brought participants to consider their asexuality in a negative light, with repeated reference to feeling "strange", "wrong" and "broken".

> I do think that I will always feel like an outsider, as most societies are really sexualized and sex-focused but knowing that asexuality is real makes it more bearable. I think I otherwise feel like any other person, I just have this major disconnect with people. It is hard to understand people's obsession with sex when I cannot share their feelings, so I often feel isolated, but I think that is mainly because my lack of interest in sex angers people and makes them treat me differently (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Participants repeatedly referred to the importance that society places on sexual and romantic normativity and the pervading sense that everyone is defined by some form of sexual attraction. For example, one participant described that they "will always feel like an outsider" due to a "sexualized and sex-focused" society and considered how "constant sexual themes" often leaves them as the "subject of ridicule among other people" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> There are entire emotions that others feel that I can't. There are life goals that are viewed as universal but I don't want. The topic so frequently turns to relationships in everyday conversations and media. It can be really othering at times (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

Moreover, many participants described feeling "excluded" as "society makes happiness, accomplishment and life goals mainly revolve around sex, love and reproduction.

> It kills me how I have been told all my life that not being in love and part of a couple was sad and how conditioned I feel by it (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

Interestingly, several female participants felt this to be “especially true for women” because of the “importance placed in romance and having a family” or a “biological child”.

> it is easy to feel different or like something is wrong particularly as a female as you are expected to have children and marry or have a boyfriend (Asexual unsure female, 27)

This sense of sexual normativity was reinforced through the presence of sex and sexuality within media and advertising, with many participants referring to the heavy use of sexual imagery and themes within modern culture.

> Sex is pushed a lot in daily life too, like in advertising and movies, and sometimes this makes me hyperaware of how different I feel to others - it always seems so natural for them so why can't I understand it? (Asexual panromantic female, 22)

7.6 Discussion

This study extends upon our knowledge of asexual identity development and internalisation within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society. Moreover, this study demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities within asexual identity development and provides evidence for the complexity of this experience. Findings will be interpreted with reference to past literature surrounding non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models, as well components of asexual identity development outlined within previous studies. The themes presented within this study are not meant to be generalisable to the

asexual population but, rather, to provide insight into the experiences and nuances that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation.

The demographic profile of participants included within this research aligns with the diverse range of gender and romantic identities reported within literature (Kelleher et al., 2022). For example, the significant number of gender non-binary participants within our sample supports evidence that a higher proportion of people do not identify as men or women within the asexual community (Greaves et al., 2021; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the prevalence of asexual women corresponds with previous reports of gender divisions among asexual people and the probability that women are more likely to be asexual (Bianchi, 2018; Hinderliter, 2009; Rothblum et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2022). Similarly, the lesser number of asexual men recruited within this research coincides with demographic profiles seen throughout literature (Bianchi, 2018; Rothblum et al., 2020). Finally, the diverse range of romantic and sexual identities reported within this study contributes towards a growing awareness of the asexual community as heterogeneous (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Clark & Zimmerman, 2022; Weis et al., 2017) and coincides with evidence that suggests asexual people are less likely to identify as heteroromantic (Antonsen et al., 2020).

7.6.1 *Discovering Asexuality and Being Asexual*

The process of discovering an asexual identity appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon a specific gender, sexual or romantic identity. The consistent nature of this process within participants' accounts may be interpreted through the influence of allonormativity and the belief that all individuals experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, romantic or

gender identity (Mollet & Lackman, 2021). Like previous research, discovery of an asexual identity involved a process of active searching that was initiated through an awareness of the self as different and an inability to relate to others (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019). Moreover, participants' desire to seek explanations for their lack of sexual attraction corresponds with past research surrounding the experience of being asexual (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and components of asexual identity development (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Robbins et al., 2016). Finally, several participants' reports of past attempts to engage in sexual activity and exploration of other sexual identities prior to the discovery of their asexuality correspond with the experiences of many asexual (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a) and non-heterosexual individuals (Rosario et al., 2006).

Participants' discovery of asexuality as a sexual identity through online communities, fanfiction and asexuality-specific literature corresponds with the role of the internet as a source of information (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019), and highlights the relatively hidden nature of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). Conversely, several participants' initial exposure to asexuality through others' suggestions, is indicative of the growing profile of asexuality and increasing recognition within society (Carrigan, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

Consistent with previous investigations, participants' identification as asexual was assisted by a sense of community and reinforced through displays of

pride (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016). Again, this process of identifying as asexual appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity. Participants' sense of relief following their identification as asexual is in line with previous research (Andersson, 2010; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021), and further highlights how an awareness of one's sexual identity and a sense of belonging can impact self-esteem and positive self-perceptions. Moreover, repeated reference to asexual communities such as AVEN further outlines the role of online forums and discussion boards within the development of an asexual identity. These findings confirm many asexual individuals' desire to increase awareness of asexuality (Brotto et al., 2010; Gupta, 2017; Scherrer, 2008), through displays of pride such as asexuality-specific artwork, literature and music.

7.6.2 *Navigating Relationships and Disclosure*

Participants' desired relationships appeared to be dependent upon their romantic identities and ranged from purely platonic and familial relationships to queer-platonic and romantic relationships. Like previous research surrounding asexual individuals' desired relationships, romantic-identified participants typically sought emotional intimacy (Foster et al., 2019; Haefner, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), whereas aromantic participants sought friendships mainly (Brotto et al., 2010; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Maxwell, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Participants did however emphasise the non-sexual nature of their relationships, irrespective of their romantic identities.

The nature of participants' desired relationships appeared to impact how they pursued those relationships, as well as others' reactions to their asexuality. For example, many romantic-identified participants considered their asexuality to hinder or compromise their success within relationships and subsequently take a passive approach to dating (Dawson et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2017; Vares, 2018, 2021). This consideration of asexuality as compromising relationships appears to stem from past experiences of dating and the influence of allonormativity, and confirms previous research surrounding the perceived practicalities of a relationship with a non-asexual partner (Dawson et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021). Moreover, several participants' willingness to engage in sexual activity is in keeping with research surrounding asexual individuals' desire to maintain relationships (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Foster et al., 2019; Gupta, 2017; Haefner, 2011; Sloan, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mollet, 2020).

Similar to past research surrounding the intersection of gender and identity, several female participants experienced sexual coercion when coming out (Gupta, 2019). Although Gupta (2019, p. 1197) suggests that male asexuals experience "greater conflict with dominant gendered sexual norms", this appeared to be most salient within female participants' accounts. This corresponds with emerging literature surrounding the gendered experiences of asexual people and specifically, the assumption of female sexual passivity (Vares, 2018; Yang, 2021). Reactions did, however, range from negative to positive and for some, indifferent and unsurprised. While some participants experienced support and understanding (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016), many experienced rejection and dismissal of their asexual identities (Sloan, 2015; Mollet & Lackman, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Savage,

2019; Vares, 2018), which later influenced their approach to coming out (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

This denial of participants' asexual identities, and an assumption that their lack of sexual attraction is subject to change, may be attributed to allonormativity (Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019), as well as the invisibility of asexuality within society (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, other peoples' assumptions of sexual pathology corresponds with past research surrounding the disclosure of an asexual identity (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020) and the belief that all people experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, gender or romantic identity (Mollet, 2021). Interestingly, several participants did not feel the need to openly express their lack of sexual attraction and believed that their asexuality was of minor significance to them. This aligns with past research whereby identity acceptance is an internal process for some individuals and is not necessarily dependent upon disclosure (Dawson et al., 2019; Mollet, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016).

7.6.3 *Internalisations*

Participants' negative understanding of their lack of sexual attraction and an understanding of the self as 'alien' may again be attributed to allonormativity and the internalisation of negative attitudes held towards asexuality. Repeated consideration of the self as 'isolated' and 'broken' reinforces our understanding of the impact that allonormative ideals can have on asexual individuals' positive self-perceptions and corresponds with previous research (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Gupta, 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015;

McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, the sexualisation of media, popular culture and advertising appears to enhance a sense of isolation amongst participants and the perceived invisibility of asexuality (Gupta, 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Although a negative understanding of asexuality was not dependent on a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity, this sense of exclusion was considered especially salient among female participants. This may be due to both heteronormative and allonormative ideals, and the importance placed among women on complying with traditional family structures and gender roles (Gupta, 2019). Moreover, 'amatonormativity' or the assumption that "a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans" (Brake, 2011, p. 88) may contribute towards a heightened sense of isolation among aromantic participants (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

7.6.4 *Implications, Limitations and Future Research*

This research identifies components of asexual identity development and internalisation within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society and develops upon previous research within the area (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). Moreover, by observing the heterogenous nature of the study population, this research provides a more inclusive insight into asexual identity development and the complexity of this experience. The components identified within this study are not intended to be universally applied to asexual identity development but rather provide an insight into the experiences common within this population. Moreover, the range of sexual, romantic and gender identities present within this study corresponds with the heterogeneous nature of the asexual population (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Weis et al., 2017). The themes present within this study do not position asexual identity

development as a linear process and do not attempt to model this across stages of development.

Several practical and theoretical implications may be derived from this study and applied within future research. To begin, the relatively congruent nature of participants' accounts may be interpreted with reference to allonormativity, with few discrepancies seen across romantic, sexual and gender identities. For example, the process of discovering and identifying with an asexual identity appears to be a common experience among asexuals and is subject to the belief that all individuals experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, romantic or gender identity. Moreover, these findings support research surrounding the role of the asexual community within the development of an asexual identity, and commonalities surrounding pride, alienation and the hidden nature of asexuality. The use of a diverse participant pool does, however, provide a preliminary insight into aspects of asexual individuals' experiences that are subject to romantic and gendered features of identity. For example, asexual individuals' approach to disclosure and how they navigate relationships appears to be influenced by their gender identities and the nature of their desired relationships. This in turn appears to impact how participants understand their lack of sexual attraction as well as their willingness to openly express their asexuality. Moreover, this may provide further insight into our understanding of asexuality as a gendered phenomenon (Gupta, 2019) and follows the movement towards differentiating romantic and sexual orientation within research (Brown et al., 2022).

There are several limitations present within this study that require consideration. As participants were gathered through the online asexual community

AVEN, this removed the presence of asexual individuals who do not have access to online forums. Considering the significance of the asexual community within participants' accounts, this may have narrowed our assessment of asexual identity development and processes of internalisation. Future research should examine the identity development and internalisation of individuals who are not recruited through online forums and asexuality-specific websites. This may provide key insights into the development of an asexual identity without the presence of an online community, as well as alternative sources of information and support. The use of an open-ended questionnaire when gathering participant information posed some limitations. For example, this hindered participants' ability to ask follow-up questions and did not allow the researcher to gain further information or explore an interesting topic. Moreover, when published online, the nature of the recruitment advertisement may have resulted in self-selection bias amongst participants. As the recruitment advertisement specified a focus on the attitudes, experiences and beliefs associated with the asexual orientation, this may have deterred participants who had recently learned of asexuality and had yet come to terms with their orientation. Although intersectionality was incorporated within our analysis and presentation of findings, future research may benefit from utilising an intersectional lens earlier on in study design. As outlined by Abrams et al., (2020), employing an intersectional approach during the initial stages of qualitative research may assist in determining participant recruitment procedures as well as data gathering techniques that are most appropriate to the study aims. For example, an absence of demographic information has limited the capacity to provide a more comprehensive review of sample characteristics beyond sexual/romantic orientation and gender identity. Therefore, applying an intersectional framework during study conceptualisation, recruitment and data

gathering, may provide a more comprehensive insight into the multidimensional nature of participants' identities, as well as their lived realities (Abrams et al., 2020). Moreover, this may generate more robust and nuanced findings surrounding the intersection of participant identities and encourage researchers to consider how sample characteristics such as race/ethnicity, social class, education and geographical location shape the experiences of asexual individuals.

Chapter 8 Psychometric Measure: Supplementary Methodology

In the previous chapter, I presented an extended insight into features of identity development common among asexual individuals, as well as aspects that were specific to diverse gender and romantic identities. The themes outlined in this study confirmed my previous findings surrounding asexual identity development and further highlighted the heterogenous nature of the asexual population. Specifically, developmental trajectories aligned with social constructionist theory and non-linear models of sexual identity, and highlighted variability and change unique to asexual individuals' experiences. Moreover, findings from this study contributed towards the development of an initial item pool, and the creation of a valid and reliable psychometric measure (chapter nine).

As the final aim of my PhD studies, I endeavoured to create a psychometric measure to assess dimension of the lives of asexual people. Having completed all previous studies, I felt equipped with the knowledge to appropriately define the construct I wished to measure, as well as the context in which this should be applied. In developing this measure, I present the first psychometric tool to accurately assess features of asexual identity development and successfully complete all objectives outlined in my thesis.

In chapter nine, I develop the 37-item Assessment of Asexual Identity Development Scale (AAID) to measure variables unique to asexuality and assess dimensions of the lives of asexual people. As the first psychometric measure of its kind, this is a reliable and useful tool to evaluate the processes that surround the development of an asexual identity and contributes substantially as the concluding study in this thesis. The focus of the current supplementary chapter is to provide

additional information surrounding the design and implementation of the AAID that could not be included in the publication style paper. This includes detailed discussion of construct conceptualisation, item generation and factor analysis. This is followed by a chapter summary and contribution to the overall thesis aims and objectives.

8.1 Research Design

Psychometric scales measure behaviours, attitudes, actions and feelings that are typically difficult to access (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021), and cannot be measured through a single item or variable (Boateng et al., 2018). Moreover, in psychology, education and social science, psychometric tools allow us to measure characteristics or 'psychological constructs' that cannot be observed directly. Examples of such constructs include intelligence, personality traits, attitudes and abilities. This involves asking people a series of questions that are representative of the construct being measured and assigning scores to their responses. Moreover, psychometric scales can be considered fundamental within psychological science as they allow us to gain information about people, events and processes (Morgado et al., 2017), as well as interventions in a variety of scientific applications (Meneses et al., 2013).

To ensure that the psychometric scale successfully measured the construct of asexual identity development, I applied a systematic approach to scale development. This involved completing a series of steps including; construct conceptualisation, 'item' or question generation, content analysis and finally, evaluating the structure and 'fitness' of the scale through statistical analysis (McCoach et al., 2013).

8.2 Construct Conceptualisation

Prior to the development of this psychometric scale, it was essential to form a clear understanding of the target construct and to accurately define what I was trying to measure (Clark & Watson, 1995). According to Haynes et al., (1995), a target construct refers to the concept, attribute or unobserved behaviour that the researcher endeavours to measure and should be articulated prior to item development or analysis. Moreover, clearly defining the target construct grants an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon being studied and assists in the process of item-generation and content validation (Boateng et al., 2018). When identifying the target construct, I followed steps outlined by McCoach et al. (2013) in which I specified the construct of asexual identity development; confirmed that there were no pre-existing instruments that adequately measured this construct; described the construct with a preliminary working definition; and specified the dimensions (if any) of the domain.

Moreover, while there are many technical aspects in scale development and validation, it was essential that I had a good understanding of the theories that underlie the phenomena being measured (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Specifically, I needed to form a clear understanding of what it was I was trying to measure and identify the basic elements of the psychometric scale in a clear and logical manner. To avoid the scale inadvertently measuring an unintended domain, I identified the 'boundaries' of an asexual identity and consulted with relevant theories of sexual identity development (DeVellis and Thorpe, 2021). A well formulated definition of asexual identity development and a tentative theoretical model associated with this, served as a guide throughout scale development. Moreover, I clearly defined the

goals and objectives of the psychometric measure (El-Den et al., 2020) as well as the target population (Haynes et al., 1995).

In the context of this research, asexual identity development was defined with reference to both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models. These encompassed processes surrounding identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different, discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities; and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others. This conceptualisation was informed by the completion of an extensive literature review (study one) as well as two qualitative studies (studies two and three).

8.3 Phase 1: Item Generation

The creation of an initial item pool is a crucial component of scale construction, with the features of each item undergoing careful consideration (Clark & Watson, 1995). Items should be grounded in prior knowledge or existing theory (El-Den et al., 2020) and the content of the item pool should err on the side of over-inclusiveness (Clark & Watson, 1995). These items may be identified through inductive or deductive approaches (Hinkin, 1995). An inductive approach involves the generation of items through qualitative research methodologies, such as focus groups or individual interviews, while a deductive approach generates items through a review of literature or assessment of existing scales (Hinkin, 1995). It is best practice to combine both inductive and deductive methods when identifying items (Boateng et al., 2018) and to systematically review all content relevant to the target construct (Clark & Watson, 1995). A combination of both inductive and deductive

approaches was applied in this study. Specifically, a literature review provided the theoretical basis for defining the domain and developing initial items, while the use of qualitative data further refined what I sought to measure.

Deductive Approach: Scoping Review

According to Clarke and Watson (1995, p. 311), the "importance of a comprehensive literature review cannot be overstated". As mentioned previously, a scoping review of literature clarified the nature and extent of the target construct, as well as the content to be included. Moreover, this literature review confirmed the absence of any existing measures that assessed asexual identity development. Again, I was aware that the exclusive use of deductive approaches when creating initial items may result in less diverse views and may reduce the validity of the scale (Morgado et al., 2017), and thus I applied a combination of both deductive and inductive approaches in this study.

Inductive Approach: Qualitative Methodologies

An inductive approach to item development utilises qualitative information to identify constructs and generate measures from individual responses (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). This was achieved through two qualitative studies utilising both individual interviews and open-ended surveys. This granted me access to genuine information on the experiences of asexual identity development and formed the basis for construct validity (Rowan & Wulff, 2007). Moreover, this reduced measurement error by incorporating language that was specific to the asexual population (Coleman et al., 2011). This was particularly applicable in the current research as language or phrases specific to the asexual population may be otherwise overlooked, or not included in the initial psychometric scale.

What makes a Good Item?

During the process of scale development, it was essential to write "good" items with a careful consideration of both wording and formatting (Clark & Watson, 1995). To me, a good item entailed language that was simple, straightforward and at an appropriate reading level for the target population. Moreover, the language used needed to transcend participant characteristics such as age, gender and romantic identity and not include 'trendy' phrases or jargon that may become quickly outdated (Clark & Watson, 1995). I avoided double-barrelled items or phrases that assessed more than one characteristic and ensured that each question followed the conventions of a normal conversation (Boateng et al., 2018). Moreover, the wording of items was neutral to avoid leading participants to respond in a particular way (El-Den et al., 2020) and was designed to capture the lived experience of the asexual population (Clark & Watson, 1995). To avoid response fatigue and facilitate that participants adequately considered their responses to each question, I included reverse-scored items (Morgado et al., 2017). Finally, I ensured that each question succeeded one another in a logical manner and grouped items according to the specific construct that they measured.

Choice of Format

When creating the initial questionnaire, I was brought to consider the most appropriate response format to use. Ultimately, I chose a Likert style format with options ranging across five points of agreement (strongly agree to strongly disagree). This facilitated the reliability of participants' responses (Krosnick & Presser, 2009) and enhanced the coherency of the overall questionnaire (Boateng et al., 2018; Clark & Watson, 1995).

8.4 Phase 2: Content Analysis

Item generation resulted in 110 items to be included in the AAID. Although this is a large number of items, I felt that it was necessary to include all items that represented some aspect of identity development found in studies one, two and three. Moreover, this decision reflects current recommendations to include a greater number of items during initial stages of scale development to enhance scale reliability and account for later exclusion of items due to inadequacy (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Morgado et al., 2017; Nunnally, 1967).

In this phase, I utilised content analysis to assess the validity of the scale and ensure that all items included in the scale aligned with the construct of an asexual identity (Morgado et al., 2017). Moreover, this step acted as pre-test to determine participants' opinions and reactions to each item and allowed me to remove any problematic items prior to the scale being applied at large. Specifically, the opinions of expert judges and members of the target population, allowed me to evaluate whether items appropriately represented the construct of interest and conceptualisations underlying this research (Morgado et al., 2017; Polit & Beck, 2006). This aligned with recommendations surrounding rigorous scale development procedures and the expectation to provide extensive information on scale reliability and quality (Polit & Beck, 2006).

As mentioned previously, the opinions of expert reviewers played a key role during the elimination of unsuitable items (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010) and when analysing the initial items pool (Morgado et al., 2017). Moreover, these opinions were particularly important due to the presence of previously unexamined items (Morgado et al., 2017). These "judges" included those who had expertise in the

development of psychometric scales or research on asexuality, as well as members of the asexual/LGBTQIA+ community. As part of their role in this study, expert reviewers and members of the target population were asked to identify themselves with one or more of the following: *I identify as asexual*; *I identify as an LGBTQIA+ person*; *I have carried out research in the area of asexuality*; *I have carried out research in the area of LBGTQIA+*. From a cohort of fifteen judges, ten had some form of relevant scholarly knowledge, eleven identified as asexual or LGBTQIA+, and three aligned themselves with all four aforementioned criteria.

Item-Content Validity Index

The item-content validity index (I-CVI) was used to determine the content validity of individual items (Lynn, 1986). Reviewers were provided with information on the target construct and where asked to evaluate the relevance and clarity of each item on 4-point scale ranging from 1 to 4 (not relevant – highly relevant) (Davis, 1992). The I-CVI was then calculated by taking the number of reviewers or "raters" who gave a score of 3 or 4 and dividing this by the total number of raters. While Lynn (1986) recommends that a panel of five or fewer experts should agree on all content with items obtaining a perfect score (1.0), a greater number of experts may relax this standard (Morgado et al., 2017). For example, an I-CVI of .83 may be acceptable for 6 or more experts, while an I-CVI of .78 may be considered acceptable for 9 or more (Lynn, 1986). During content analysis, I chose to further relax this standard due to my large number of raters, as well as the novel nature of items and concepts being scored. Moreover, I felt that it was important to recognise items gained from original and genuine sources (studies one, two and three) (Morgado et al., 2017) and thus maintained any items with a score greater than or equal to .6. This resulted in 70 items to be included in the resulting measure.

8.5 Phase 3 and 4: Establishing Psychometric Properties

Sample Selection and Sample Size

A psychometric scale should be generalisable and the concepts being measured should be applicable among all persons of the target population (El-Den et al., 2020). To achieve this, the sample used during the development of a psychometric scale should adequately represent the population of interest (Flora & Flake, 2017). Because of this, eligibility criteria for participant selection included individuals who lacked sexual attraction, identified as asexual or along the asexual spectrum and were over eighteen years of age. None of race, gender or romantic identity were considered criteria for exclusion. To avoid sample-specific or chance relationships when verifying findings and confirming factor structure, I used separate data sets for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Flora & Flake, 2017).

Although the literature lacks consistency on the exact number of participants to be used (Henson & Roberts, 2006), several guidelines were considered. For example, Comrey and Lee, (1992) proposed a guide to sample size for factor analysis that ranged from 50 to 300 and even 1000, which they describe as poor, good and excellent respectively. Similarly, Tabachnick and Fidell, (1996) suggested that 300 participants is sufficient when conducting factor analysis. Despite this, much of the literature suggests that sample size may be dependent upon the number of items included within a scale. Using the variable ratio, it is suggested that an adequate ratio of participants can range anywhere from 3:1 to 20:1 (Williams et al., 2010), with Suhr (2012) proposing a sample size of 5 times the number of items included within a scale. Although I had initially aimed for a sample size of

approximately 600 respondents, 1651 participants completed the survey. This large number of participants is similar to the high response seen in study three and is again reflective of some members of the asexual community's desire to engage in research activity and promote awareness of asexuality.

Mode of Delivery

Following the development and content analysis of the initial item pool, a survey was distributed to participants via Qualtrics software (Software Version 2018) and posted to the asexual specific platform, AVEN. Although this mode of delivery presented time and cost benefits and allowed me access to an asexual population, there were some limitations associated with this. For example, coverage bias may have hindered findings and skewed information as I excluded participants who do not have access to the internet or were not part of the AVEN community.

Reliability

Internal consistency is the most widely used measure of reliability in psychometric measurement and provides information on the homogeneity of items included in a scale (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Specifically, Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951), may be used to provide information on how closely related a set of items are within a group by calculating the average inter-correlation among items. As a central point of measurement reliability, Nunnally (1967) recommends a Cronbach's Alpha criterion of .7 to indicate reliability in research. However, recent research suggests that a high alpha value does not necessarily imply that a measure is unidimensional and may provide false confidence in the consistency of the resulting scale (Morgado et al., 2017). Thus, current recommendation in scale development implies that assessment of internal consistency should be carried out in conjunction with other measures of reliability (Morgado et al., 2017).

Although Cronbach's alpha was used in initial reliability testing, I later incorporated the use of McDonald's Omega (ω). Specifically, Omega testing provided a more realistic estimate of reliability, as well as a more accurate degree of confidence in the consistency of the resulting scale (McDonald, 1999; Ventura-León & Caycho-Rodríguez, 2017). For example, Omega testing provided a truer estimate of scale reliability by taking into account the strength of associations between items and constructs, as well as item-specific measurement errors. This allowed me to overcome some potential limitations associated with Cronbach's Alpha such as its sensitivity to the large number of participants and items included in this study (McDonald, 1999; Ventura-León & Caycho-Rodríguez, 2017).

In sequence of internal consistency for the AAID, content analysis acted as the first assessment of reliability. This was followed by my use of both Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega. Reliability testing prior to factor analysis resulted in the deletion of several items as some were shown to lower reliability. Specifically, items were removed from "Being in an Allosexual World" and "Disclosure", as well as the construct of "internalisation" being deleted entirely. Following EFA and CFA, McDonald's Omega reliability testing was carried out on resulting a-priori factors and all factors reached acceptable levels of reliability.

8.6 Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was used to reduce the measurable variables in my dataset to fewer latent variables that shared a common variance (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Yong & Pearce, 2013). Specifically, this allowed me to group variables into meaningful categories based on their shared variance and further define constructs and patterns in the data so that relationships between items were easily interpretated

(Yong & Pearce, 2013). Moreover, this form of analysis was particularly suited to the large dataset included in this study and had the capacity to reduce items from the questionnaire to a smaller set of underlying constructs otherwise known as "factors" (Yong & Pearce, 2013). For example, in the context of the current research, an asexual individual's score on questions surrounding their willingness to disclose their orientation, as well as perceived reaction from others, was placed under the factor "Disclosure". This factor, which was not directly measurable itself, was then informed by the individual's response to each item and overall score.

As mentioned previously, the two types of factor analysis used in this study were EFA and CFA. This corresponds with current recommendation to include both EFA and CFA when carrying out factor analysis, and to apply a combination of "fit" or modification indices to gain more consistent psychometric results (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Morgado et al., 2017; Yong & Pearce, 2013). While EFA allowed me to uncover patterns in the data and test predictions, CFA helped me to confirm the factor structure through a path diagram (Yong & Pearce, 2013). Moreover, modification indices were used to show where constraints placed on the factor pattern caused misfits and later inferred that the factor structure was replicable (Reise et al., 2000).

Exploratory Factor Analysis

As an exploratory method, EFA was particularly suited as a form of factor analysis to generate hypothesises surrounding the relationship between variables (DeCoster, 1998; Henson & Roberts, 2006; Suhr, 2012; Williams et al., 2010). As the number of factors included in the measure are largely based upon pragmatic criteria and researcher decision (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996), I made several efforts to minimise subjectivity. This included taking a systematic approach to factor

reduction (Williams et al., 2010), interpreting and labelling the data correctly (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996) and maintaining an explicit account of decision making (Henson & Roberts, 2006).

The first step I took in EFA was to ensure the factorability of the data and confirm factor analysis as an appropriate analytical technique (El-Den et al., 2020). This involved carrying out a number of checks to assess the suitability of the data including the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (El-Den, 2020). A high KMO value and a significant Bartlett's test ($P < 0.05$) confirmed the factorability of the data. When deciding the number of factors to extract, I used an a-priori factor structure and relied on theory derived from previous studies. This resulted in the proposed factors of "Being Asexual"; "Becoming Asexual"; "Being in an Allosexual World"; "Navigating Relationships"; and "Disclosure".

The next stage in the analysis involved deciding how many factors to retain using a combination of subjective and objective methods. I performed EFA on each individual a-priori factor without rotation and extraction based on eigenvalue ≥ 1 (Costello & Osborne, 2019; Kaiser, 1960). Specifically, eigenvalues allowed me to calculate how much variance of the total sample was explained by a factor and decide how many factors to retain. This decision to apply an eigenvalue of ≥ 1 was due to the criterion that "each component should explain at least one variable's worth of the variability, and therefore, the eigenvalue criterion states that only components with eigenvalues greater than 1 should be retained" (Crawford et al., 2010). Although some argue that this may over-simplify and potentially over-estimate the number of factors to retain, I incorporated other techniques including Cattell's scree test (Cattell 1978) and predetermined level of cumulative variance (Hair et al.,

2006). Examining the scree plot and point at which the curve inflected, as well as applying a predetermined level of cumulative variance (60%), allowed me to confirm the number of factors that should be generated from the analysis (Hooper, 2021).

Following preliminary analysis, the next step involved item deletion and assessing the pattern matrix for cross-loadings. As each item loaded onto a factor, I examined how the strengths of loadings differed and removed items that loaded below the cut-off point of .3. This allowed me to determine with a greater certainty which factor the items best described (El-Den, 2020). When examining cross-loadings (i.e., split loadings), I assessed the difference in numerical values across factors and removed items that had high loadings but little difference on multiple factors. I calculated the impact of cross-loadings using the following three step process: I determined that loadings were above .3; I squared each loading and compared the ratio of the larger loading to the smaller loading; I removed problematic items with ratios below 1.5 and retained items above this threshold. These decisions were also based on my own interpretations with regard to the theories that underly each construct. For example, when analysing the factor "Disclosure" I needed to ensure that items loading high on this factor were related to the concept of disclosing an asexual identity. I repeated this process until the research team felt that each factor was defined by a distinct cluster of interrelated variables (El-Den, 2020).

The next step involved factor rotation and further interpretation of items. This minimised ambiguity and allowed variables to load on as few factors as possible while at the same time enhancing factor loadings (Yong & Pearce, 2013). When deciding which rotation method to apply, I considered the use of both orthogonal and oblique methods (Rummel, 1970). I chose orthogonal and specifically varimax

rotation as this minimised the number of variables with high loadings on each factor and worked to make small loadings even smaller (Yong & Pearce, 2013). Moreover, this rotation method produced the most easily interpretable or "simple structure" solution (Tabachnick et al., 2019, p. 507). Finally, when naming subsequent factors, I chose a label that best represented items included in each factor. While many of the labels remained the same as those identified in the a-priori factor structure, additional factors included "Relationship Desires" and "Asexual Community".

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

I verified the factor structure or 'model' derived from EFA using CFA. Specifically, I ran a CFA on a separate dataset and hypothesised that items would adequately represent the factors identified in EFA (El-Den, 2020). To do this, I created a model using AMOS software's graphical interface. This allowed me to draw the model and run statistical tests to see how well the model fit the data. As the large dataset and number of items made it difficult to achieve a small and non-significant Chi-Square (El-Den et al., 2020), I paid attention to multiple goodness of fit indices. Observing these fit indices allowed me to determine whether the hypothesised model was a valid representation of the population model. For example, I determined overall fit through the following indices: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) <0.08; comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.9; CMIN/DF > 3,0; NFI > 0.9; GFI > 0.9; as well as an increase in AIC and BIC.

Following initial statistical tests, I determined that several fit indices did not meet criteria for good model fit. To attain better fit and improve accuracy of the model, I re-specified the model based on these modification indices (Byrne et al., 2007; Chen, 2007). To do this I first observed the modification indices and

determined the largest modification value (Brown & Moore, 2012; Byrne, 2010). This allowed me to identify which items' error terms had a high correlation and to what extent the model's goodness of fit would improve when these error terms were correlated. I then added an error covariance to the two items with the highest modification value and reran the model. I repeated this process of adding error covariances between items until I achieved good model fit. When deciding which error terms to be correlated, I covaried items that pertained to similar questions, and fell within the same latent constructs (Brown & Moore, 2012). For example, I covaried the items "affection" and "emotional intimacy" within the construct of Relationships Desires, as well as "respectful" and "accepting" within the construct of Disclosure. The results indicated that the modified model 9 provided best model fit to the data. Moreover, factor loadings of the 37 items were above .5 and at a significant level ($p<.05$), indicating these observed items adequately defined the six factors. The Omega value of all subscales was > .7 demonstrating good internal consistency.

8.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter begins with a review of pertinent literature surrounding asexuality and the processes that surround asexual identity development. I then outline how I conceptualised the AAID and my decision to adopt a multidimensional approach to measurement. This is followed by a detailed description of the scale's initial content dimensions, as well as a brief overview of item generation. I then provide a detailed account of participant demographics and my decision to carry out both EFA and CFA. Tables and figures are framed by a comprehensive description

of the steps taken when carrying out factor analysis. Modification indices, fit statistics and a path diagram are provided, followed by the final version of the 37-item AAID.

The subscales included in the final version of the AAID correspond with features of asexual identity development outlined in studies one, two and three. For example, the subscales “Being Asexual” and “Becoming Asexual” reflect the processes that underlie how participants come to discover and identify as asexual across studies and is representative of asexual developmental trajectories identified within literature. Moreover, items included in the subscales “Disclosure”, “Navigating Relationships” and “Being in an Allosexual World” correspond with the unique challenges associated with asexuality and highlight the role of heteronormativity and allonormativity within asexual identity development. The additional subscale “Asexual Community” is reminiscent of the unique role that online communities play in the expression and acceptance of an asexual identity. Finally, the emergence of “Navigating Relationships: Desires” as an independent subscale highlights many asexual individuals’ motivations to engage in relationships and fosters an understanding of the variability associated with asexual identities.

Chapter 9 Measuring Features of Asexual Identity Development: The Development and Validation of a Psychometric Scale (Study 4)

Sinéad Kelleher, University College Cork

Mike Murphy, University College Cork

Raegan Murphy, University College Cork

This chapter is an exact copy of the journal paper referred to above.

9.1 Abstract

This study describes initial steps in the development of the 37-item Assessment of Asexual Identity Development Scale (AAID) to measure variables unique to asexuality and assess dimensions of the lives of asexual people. Items were developed through qualitative data analysis (N = 104) and a pilot measure was administered to a sample of expert reviewers for content analysis (N = 15). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (N = 825) resulted in a seven-dimensional construct including: Being Asexual, Becoming Asexual, Asexual Community, Being in an Allosexual World, Disclosure, Navigating Relationships and Navigating Relationships: Desires. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (N = 826) confirmed the dimensionality, reliability and validity of the AAID scale and good model fit was obtained (comparative fit index = .96, root mean square error of approximation = .038, CMIN/DF = 2.20, $\chi 2$ = 1318.84). Standardised factor loadings of all items were high or moderate and all subscales indicated good to excellent internal reliability (ω = .72 - .93). This measure is a reliable and useful tool to evaluate the processes that

surround the development of an asexual identity and will contribute to the currently growing body of literature on asexuality.

Keywords: Asexuality, Identity Development, Psychometric Measurement, Mixed-methods

9.2 Introduction

Asexuality is a unique sexual orientation that is best defined by an individual lacking sexual attraction towards other people and identifying as belonging on the asexual spectrum (Catri, 2021; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). The asexual community is considered a particularly heterogeneous population, with the presence of varying sexual (e.g., asexual, demisexual, gray-asexual), romantic (e.g., aromantic, gray-romantic, homoromantic) and gender identities (e.g., cisgender, transgender, pan-gender) (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Bulmer & Izuma, 2018; Hammack et al., 2019; Kelleher et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Scherrer, 2008; Weis et al., 2017). Moreover, asexuality has received an increase in academic attention in the past decade (Kelleher et al., 2022; Yule et al., 2015) with much of the literature surrounding the conceptualisation of asexual identities and characteristics of the asexual population (Yule et al., 2015; Zheng & Su, 2022). This coincides with a notable growth in the asexual community and increasing visibility of the orientation (Carrigan, 2011; Lund, 2021).

9.2.1 *Theories of Sexual Identity*

Although initially conceived as a major task during adolescence (Erikson, 1950), identity development has been applied throughout stages of adulthood (Arnett, 2007). In this way, the development of an individual's identity is believed to

comprise of varying stages of exploring and processing one's identity as well as gaining commitment to an integrated sense of identity (Worthington et al., 2008). Early theories of sexual identity development are positioned predominantly as sequential, stage-based models (Cass, 1996; Troiden, 1989). For example, the Cass model (Cass, 1996; Cass, 1979) posits that the development of a sexual identity is a universal or linear process which begins through an awareness of non-heteronormative sexual attractions and concludes with acceptance and a synthesised version of oneself (Hall et al., 2021; Toomey et al., 2016). Since then, many researchers have proposed alternative models of lesbian and gay sexual identity development (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994; Fox, 2003; Prince, 1995; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2006; Troiden, 1989), with all sharing relatively similarly features (Worthington et al., 2008). However, stage-based models such as such as the ones described above, have received criticism surrounding their conceptualisation of sexual identity and failure to take into account the nuances that underlie the experiences of non-heterosexual people (Toomey et al., 2016). More recently, sexual identity development is understood as the life-long changes, processes and experiences that are subject to an individual's sexual attractions, as well as the integration of multiple facets of identity (Hall et al., 2021; Parmenter et al., 2022). For example, diverse trajectories are shown to exist within non-heterosexual communities, with increasing evidence to suggest variability among sexual minority orientations (Hall et al., 2021). Moreover, the process of developing a sexual identity is shown to be particularly difficult for non-heterosexual and indeed, asexual people, due to societal heteronormative assumptions (i.e., all people are attracted to the opposite sex) and allonormative beliefs (i.e., all people experience sexual attraction) (Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Mollet, 2021; Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

9.2.2 *Asexual Identity Development*

Consistent with research surrounding sexual minority orientations, an awareness of the self as different from others has been shown to initiate the discovery of asexuality (Anderson, 2020; Carrigan, 2011; Foster, 2017; Kelleher et al., 2022; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019), with relief and self-acceptance marking identity integration (Kelleher et al., 2022; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, interpersonal interactions that surround disclosure and navigating relationships, are central to many asexual individuals' identity development (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016) and processes of internalising a positive sense of asexuality (Kelleher et al., 2022). Equally, online communities and sources of information have been shown to be instrumental in asexual individuals' recognition and acceptance of themselves as asexual (Kelleher et al., 2022; McInroy et al., 2020; Robbins et al., 2016).

Although there are several features of asexuality that correspond with processes seen within other non-heterosexual identity development models, there are many experiences unique to the asexual population that distinguish them from other sexual minority groups (Greaves et al., 2021; Kelleher et al., 2022; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016). For example, the relatively hidden nature of asexuality has led to heightened levels of confusion among those questioning their sexual identity, and increased incidences of dismissal (Kelleher et al., 2022). Moreover, when disclosing their sexual identities, many asexual individuals experience disbelief and the assumption that their lack of sexual attraction may be due to a physical or psychological disorder (Kelleher et al., 2022; Robbins et al.,

2016). The prevalence of these experiences may be attributed to allonormativity (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), a lack of awareness of asexuality and limited visibility (Kelleher et al., 2022; Winer et al., 2022), as well as assumptions of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSSD) or Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder (SIAD) (Brotto & Milani, 2022). Furthermore, evidence suggests that asexual individuals do not follow the same identity development trajectory as other sexual minority groups (McInroy et al., 2020), with increased incidences of social isolation and erasure leading them to internalise a negative understanding of their lack of sexual attraction (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020, 2021). For example, limited availability of role models and a lack of cultural scripts have been shown to hinder allosexual people's (i.e., people who experience sexual attraction to others) ability to accept asexual identities, with asexual people experiencing less familial social support than other sexual minorities (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; Simon et al., 2022). This lack of exposure to asexuality has amplified the role of the internet in the development of an asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019), with many seeking support and validation through online communities (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Robbins et al., 2016). Ultimately, this dismissal or denial of an asexual identity may cause individuals to internalise a negative understanding of their asexuality and may contribute towards mental health difficulties associated with the orientation (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

Research indicates that identity exploration and resolution may contribute positively towards the wellbeing of non-heterosexual individuals (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Romero & Roberts, 2003). Equally, a negative or incomplete sense of identity

is considered a risk factor for sexual minority individuals' mental health (Meyer, 2013). This is particularly salient among asexual identities with many experiencing heightened levels of depression, anxiety and social avoidance when compared to both heterosexual and non-heterosexual populations (Borgogna et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2014; Marshal et al., 2011; McInroy et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2022; Yule et al., 2013; Zheng & Su, 2022). This may be attributed to greater reports of identity uncertainty among asexual individuals and increased incidences of internalised asexuality-phobia. For example, self-reported non-asexual individuals on the asexual spectrum have been shown to have a more negative minority identity than self-reported asexual individuals (Zheng & Su, 2022). Specifically, features of a negative or incomplete sense of identity such as acceptance concerns, difficulty processing and identity uncertainty among asexual spectrum people are associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Zheng & Su, 2022). Thus, as identity uncertainty is shown to be related to asexual peoples' wellbeing, further research is required to explore the association between asexuality-specific factors and mental health (Zheng & Su, 2022). Like other measures of non-heterosexual identity, this may include statistical examination of the key features that underly asexual individuals' experiences, as well as the creation of a measure to better map this process.

9.2.3 *Scale Development and Conceptualisation*

A major difficulty when attempting to access features of sexual minority identity is determining which variables to measure (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Previous research has focused on multiple aspects of identity such as internalised homonegativity (Moradi et al., 2010), concealment (Meyer, 2007), disclosure

(Feldman & Wright, 2013), social support (Bregman et al., 2013), identity uncertainty, as well as the evaluation of one's group within their wider social sphere (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Moreover, recent measures of sexual minority identity have adopted a dimensional approach to assessment that includes the evaluation of an individual's social experiences such as prejudice and community involvement, as well as their self-views and the centrality of their identity to their self-concepts (Cramer et al., 2018). Although there are several measures that reliably assess sexual minority identity among both LGB (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Worthington et al., 2008) and sexual special interest groups (e.g., people of alternative romantic relationships, polyamory and sexual practices) (Cramer et al., 2018), there are currently none which examine features specific to the asexual population. Moreover, while several features of asexual identity development coincide with processes seen within other measures of non-heterosexual identities, there remains no measure to assess experiences unique to asexual people. For example, while the Asexual Identification Scale (Yule et al., 2015) and the Asexual Microaggression Scale (Foster, 2017) provide valid measures for assessing asexuality and asexual prejudice respectively, they do not examine the processes that underly asexual identity development. Furthermore, although Zheng and Su (2022) measured features of asexual identity development through an adjusted version of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale (Mohr & Kendra, 2011), they suggest that specific aspects of asexual identities be explored in future research. Moreover, a standardised tool measuring the development of an asexual identity may shed further light on asexuality-specific developmental pathways and differentiate this from HSSD and SIAD (Brotto & Milani, 2022).

As mentioned previously, the asexual community can be considered particularly diverse, with the presence of varying sexual and gender identities (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Kelleher et al., 2022; Weis et al., 2017). For example, when compared to non-asexual populations, asexual people are more likely to identify as gender non-binary (Rothblum et al., 2020), and report a higher prevalence of discordant romantic and sexual identities (Antonsen et al., 2020; Clark & Zimmerman, 2022; Zheng & Su, 2018). This brings forth the issue of generalisability and whether it is sensible to conceptualise identity development as common among asexual individuals regardless of varying sub-identities. Although there are some discrepancies on the basis of gender and romantic orientation (Haefner, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Vares, 2018), research suggests that the key events and sense-making processes that underly asexual identity development are common throughout the population and follow a relatively typical trajectory (Kelleher et al., 2022). Moreover, although asexual individuals may identify with a specific orientation (e.g., biromantic asexual), their involvement within asexual communities and endorsement of a lack of sexual attraction is indicative of their placement along the broader asexual spectrum. Equally, developing a measure that is limited to a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity may negate the complexity of identification within the asexual community (Kelleher et al., 2022) and marginalise those who do not identify within a definitive category. Therefore, creating a measure that encompasses all asexual sub-identities will ensure inclusivity and allow for the comparison of individuals across the asexual spectrum.

9.2.4 *The Present Study*

This paper reports the development of the 37-item Assessment of Asexual Identity Development Scale (AAID). Specifically, the purpose of this study is to develop a set of items that assess dimensions of the lives of asexual people and examine hypothesised features of asexual identity development. This includes uncovering patterns within the data and testing predictions, as well as verifying the factor structure of the resulting scale. As the first psychometric tool of its kind, the AAID will provide a standardised method of describing the identity development of asexual individuals and will contribute to a growing body of literature developing psychometrically and theoretically grounded measures of sexual minority identity. This research topic is timely and corresponds with a growing interest in the processes that underlie asexual identity development (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), as well as an increase in empirical research and theoretical articles (Mollet, 2020). Moreover, it is believed that this research will assist in the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better evaluate the processes contributing to the development of an asexual identity and distinguish this from sexual desire disorders.

In the context of the present study, asexual identity development is conceptualised as a process of searching, of becoming aware of oneself as asexual, and of interactions with others. This encompasses processes surrounding identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different, discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities; and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others. This conceptualisation is informed by the completion of an extensive literature review

(Kelleher et al., 2022), as well as two qualitative studies that examine features of identity development specific to asexual individuals (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a, 2022b). The target population is defined as individuals who lack sexual attraction and identify along the asexual spectrum.

9.3 Method

Development of the AAID comprised of three phases: item generation; content analysis; exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Participants in earlier stages were not targeted for recruitment in later stages. All statistical analyses were carried out using IBM's Statistical Software Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.0 and AMOS, version 26.0.

9.3.1 *Phase I: Item Generation*

The initial item pool of 110 items for the AAID (AAID-110) was developed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, namely a systematic scoping review (Kelleher et al., 2022), analysis of multiple in-depth interviews (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), and a self-completed open-ended questionnaire (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). In-depth interviews were carried out with five self-identified asexual females between the ages of 18 and 40 and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Open-ended questionnaires were completed by 99 self-identified asexual individuals between the ages of 18 and 72 ($M = 27.97$, $SD = 10.36$), who identified predominantly as either female, non-binary and male. There was a range of romantic orientations within this sample including aromantic, heteroromantic, gray-romantic, pan-romantic and biromantic.

9.3.2 *Phase II: Content Analysis*

A panel of 15 individuals rated the relevance of items included in the AAID-110 self-report questionnaire for clarity and content validity. The panel included members who have completed research with non-heterosexual and/or asexual communities, as well as members who identify as non-heterosexual and/or asexual (Table 9.1). The survey was distributed via email and responses gathered using Qualtrics software (Software Version 2018).

Table 9.1 Content Analysis

No.	**I identify as asexual**	**I identify as an LGBTQIA+ person**	**I have carried out research in the area of asexuality**	**I have carried out research in the area of LGBTQIA+**
1			X	
2	X	X	X	X
3		X		X
4			X	
5	X		X	
6			X	
7			X	
8	X	X	X	X
9	X	X		
10	X	X	X	X
11	X	X		
12	X	X		
13	X	X		
14	X	X		
15	X	X	X	

The item content validity index (I-CVI) was used to evaluate the relevance of each item (Rodrigues et al., 2017). This involved panel members assessing the relevance of items to their content dimension along four markers that ranged from highly relevant (with a score of 4) to not relevant (with a score of 1). I-CVI was then calculated as the number of raters giving an item a score of "highly relevant" or "relevant" divided by the total number of raters. Although Zamanzadeh et al., (2015) recommend that items with a score of less than 0.7 should be removed from the preliminary measure, we opted to retain all items that scored greater than or equal to 0.6. This more liberal approach to item retention was based on the novel nature of the measure, as well as the large number of recruited panel members making it difficult to achieve consensus (Morgado et al., 2017; Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). Moreover, as items were developed through original and genuine sources (Morgado et al., 2017) it was felt that lower scoring items may still represent key features of asexual identity development. This led to the removal of 40 items and resulted in 70 items to undergo factor analysis (AAID-70).

9.3.3 *Phase III: Administration and Analysis of the AAID-70*

Participants

Overall, 1651 participants between the ages of 18 and 90 completed the survey (M = 26.48, SD = 7.44). The majority of participants identified as asexual, gray-asexual and demi-sexual, and had on average, a higher level of education. Moreover, participants identified with a wide range of romantic and gender identities. The demographic profile of participants is shown in detail in table 9.2. To adequately represent the diverse population of interest (Flora & Flake, 2017), eligibility criteria for participant selection included individuals who lack sexual

attraction, identify as asexual or along the asexual spectrum and are over eighteen years of age. None of race, gender or romantic identity were considered criteria for exclusion. To avoid sample specific or chance relationships when verifying findings and confirming factor structure, the sample was split in half and data were randomly assigned to undergo EFA (N = 825) and CFA (N = 826) (Flora & Flake, 2017).

Table 9.2 Demographic Characteristics

Identity Type	***N***	**%**
Sexual Identity		
Asexual	1192	72.2
Gray-asexual	216	13.1
Demisexual	162	9.8
Self-describe	52	3.1
Aegosexual	23	1.4
Aceflux	5	.3
Romantic Identity		
Heteroromantic	172	10.4
Homoromantic	109	6.6
Biromantic	260	15.7
Panromantic	173	10.5
Demiromantic	153	9.3
Aromantic	457	27.7
Gray-romantic	178	10.8
Self-describe	129	7.8
Aegoromantic	7	.4
Queer	13	.8
Gender Identity		
Male	123	7.5
Female	830	50.3

Transman	46	2.8
Transwoman	17	1.0
Non-binary/third gender	463	28.0
Self-describe	77	4.7
Agender	59	3.6
Genderfluid	18	1.1
Gender queer	15	.9
Gender neutral	2	.1
Education		
< High School Degree	32	1.9
High School graduate	254	15.4
College, no degree	381	23.1
Associate degree	108	6.5
Bachelor's degree	560	33.9
Master's degree	248	15.0
Doctoral degree	28	1.7
Professional degree (JD, MD)	22	1.3

Procedures

The AAID-70 comprised of 6 subscales that measured constructs of asexual identity development. These included: Being Asexual; Becoming Asexual; Being in an Allosexual World; Navigating Relationships; Disclosure; and Internalisation. The survey was distributed via Qualtrics software (Software Version 2018) to the online platform Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Members of the AVEN project team approved the study description and call for participants prior to advertising on the AVEN discussion forum. Data were collected in July 2022.

Materials

The subscales of the AAID-70 and detail of their content dimensions are presented below. Total AAID scores were calculated by summing responses from all questions. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "*strongly agree*" to "*strongly disagree*". As items included in each subscale were phrased either positively or negatively, negatively worded items were reverse scored. Higher scores on each subscale indicate successful identity exploration (i.e., Becoming Asexual), resolution (i.e., Being Asexual) and internalisation (i.e., Internalisation), as well as more positive interpersonal interactions (i.e., Navigating Relationships, Disclosure and Being in an Allosexual World).

Being Asexual. The six items included in this subscale (minimum score = 6, maximum = 30) were designed to measure how individuals understand their asexual identity. This included acceptance of one's asexuality and identification as asexual, the role of the asexual community and displays of pride (e.g., "asexuality is an important part of who I am").

Becoming Asexual. The fifteen items included in this subscale (minimum = 15, maximum = 75) were designed to measure how asexual individuals come to discover and identify with an asexual identity. This included feeling different, searching for a sexual identity and the role of the asexual community, as well as feelings of acceptance, relief and justification for their lack of sexual attraction (e.g., "I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation").

Being in an Allosexual World. The seven items included in this subscale (minimum = 7, maximum = 35) were designed to measure how asexual people believe allosexual people (i.e., those who experience sexual attraction) view asexuality. This

included the belief that allosexual people question the legitimacy of asexuality, do not view asexuality as a valid sexual identity or consider it a medical condition (e.g., "allosexual people view asexual people: sexually repressed").

Navigating Relationships. The eighteen items included in this subscale (minimum = 18, maximum = 90) were designed to measure how asexual people experience partner relationships with regard to their asexual identities, as well as features of their desired relationships (e.g., "my asexuality is an obstacle within partner relationships").

Disclosure. The seventeen items included in this subscale (minimum = 17, maximum = 85) were designed to measure asexual individuals' approach to disclosure and expected or experienced reactions of others to their asexual identities (e.g., "I am selective in who I come out to").

Internalisation. The seven items included in this subscale (minimum = 7, maximum = 35) were designed to measure the negative ways in which many asexual people understand their lack of sexual attraction. This involved an understanding of their asexuality as invisible or confusing, as well as the belief that their asexuality hinders their ability to form relationships (e.g., "I struggle to fit in").

Statistical Analyses

Factor analysis was used to develop, refine and evaluate the structure of the AAID-70 (Flora & Flake, 2017). This analytic method is particularly suited to the interpretation of data gathered through self-report questionnaires (Williams et al., 2010) and has been applied throughout research measuring identity related constructs

of non-heterosexual individuals (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Moreover, as factor analysis determines how variables correspond with their underlying constructs, this contributed towards greater refinement of theory and enhanced the validity of the resulting measure (Williams et al., 2010). In this study, both EFA and CFA were carried out on the dataset. As items were developed following a systematic review, two qualitative investigations and content analysis with subject experts, an a-priori factor structure was determined prior to psychometric assessment. EFA was considered the most suitable form of factor analysis as it allowed researchers to specify the number of factors to extract based upon a-priori assumptions (Sakaluk & Short, 2017; Suhr, 2006; Taherdoost et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2010).

9.4 Results

9.4.1 *Reliability*

Internal consistency of items included in each a-priori factor was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) (Cronbach, 1951). Estimating α contributed towards the validity of analysis and interpretation of data (Cortina, 1993; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) and was particularly suitable when determining reliability of the Likert-type scales measuring affective constructs (Sharma, 2016). Moreover, calculating α described the extent to which all items included in the AAID-70 measured the same construct and determined internal consistency before carrying out further statistical examination (Mraity et al., 2014). Although Cronbach (1951) suggested a cut-off point of 0.6 for each extracted factor, we opted for 0.7 as an acceptable value for internal consistency (Mraity et al., 2014). Internal consistency of the overall scale was good with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.82. However, internal consistency analysis indicated that the a-priori factors "Being in an Allosexual World" and

"Disclosure" had several non-performing items that lowered reliability. These items were removed prior to further analysis. All items included in the a-priori factor "Internalisation" were removed as they failed to reach an acceptable level of reliability (table 9.3).

Table 9.3 Reliability of A-priori Factors

A-priori Factor	**Item**	**α**	**α (item deleted)**
Disclosure		**.787**	
	Coming out is important to me		.798
	Coming out is unnecessary		.802
	Important to increase awareness of asexuality		.788
	Establish my lack of sexual attraction		.789
Disclosure		**.836**	
	I prefer to keep my sexual orientation private		.837
Being in an Allosexual World		**.815**	
	Invisible		.817
	Different		.821
Internalisation		**.382**	
	Have trouble forming relationships		.251
	Confusing		.205
	Invisible		.383

9.4.2 *Exploratory Factor Analysis:*

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out on each individual a-priori factor to determine the number of underlying constructs and the factor structure of the observed variables (Child, 1990). This involved performing an initial EFA

without rotation and extraction based on eigenvalue ≥ 1 (Costello & Osborne, 2019; Kaiser, 1960). Additional tests for factor retention were implemented (Velicer & Jackson, 1990) including examination of scree plots and proportion of variance explained ≥ 60% (Costello & Osborne, 2019). To provide measures of statistical probability, the overall significance of each correlation matrix was weighed through Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1950; Dziuban & Shirkey, 1974). Results for each factor were significant and indicated their suitability for factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value for each factor was greater than .6 further indicating the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). Communality of each a-priori factor was assessed with the minimum factor loading criterion set to 0.4 as a suitable cut-off value (Beavers et al., 2019). This decision is in line with research which suggests that factor loadings above the 0.4 cut-off point are preferable, irrespective of sample size (Laher, 2010; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). When items failed to load on any dimension significantly, EFAs were re-run excluding those items. Where appropriate, factor solutions were forced on remaining items and principal axis factoring was carried out using varimax rotation. Varimax as an orthogonal method of rotation was chosen as it produced a simpler and more easily interpretable structure of factors (Koyuncu & Kilic, 2019; Yong & Pearce, 2013). Moreover, as the data corresponded with a-priori assumptions, an orthogonal rotation was considered more accurate (Costello & Osborne, 2019). The impact of cross-loading items was calculated using the process outlined by Hair et al., (2013). Any items that loaded along two factors and were below the 1.5 threshold (Hair et al., 2013) were removed.

Reliability of the resulting a-priori factors and items were calculated using McDonalds Omega (ω). This reliability estimate presented a more realistic estimate

of true reliability within each factor (Hayes & Coutts, 2020) and provided a model-based approach to assess scale and subscale reliability (Dunn & McCray, 2020). All ω values were above 0.7 and indicated good to strong reliability for each factor (Kalkbrenner, 2021). The results of this can be seen in table 9.4.

Table 9.4 Reliability of A-priori Factors (McDonald's Omega)

Factor, Item	**Mean**	**SD**	**Loading**	**Error Variance**	**McDonald's omega (ω)**
Being Asexual					.83
I conceal my asexuality	3.15	1.24	.94	.65	
I do not present myself as asexual to others	3.08	1.23	.99	.51	
I am not openly asexual	3.17	1.31	1.03	.65	
The Asexual Community					.87
The asexual community acted as a source of support	3.86	1.06	.868	.37	
The asexual community acted as a source of comfort	4.18	.97	.80	.30	
The asexual community allowed me to share my experiences	3.75	1.03	.78	.46	
The asexual community helped me to develop a sense of comradery	4.13	.97	.76	.35	
Becoming Asexual					.75
I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation	4.03	1.13	.33	1.16	
Discovering the asexual orientation allowed me to better understand my lack of sexual attraction	4.59	.73	.19	.49	
Discovering the asexual orientation helped me to accept my differences	4.22	.94	.26	.81	

Being in an Allosexual world					.83
Sexual repressed	1.92	.89	.68	.32	
Prudes	2.02	1.03	.79	.45	
Late Bloomers	1.73	.98	.74	.42	
Unfeeling	2.37	1.05	.65	.69	
Not a Legitimate Orientation	2.35	1.09	.69	.69	
Disclosure					.88
Unable to understand	2.14	1.05	.61	.72	
Dismissive	2.3	1.12	.77	.67	
Rejecting	3.1	1.19	1	.42	
Unaccepting	3.1	1.21	1.01	.44	
Disbelieving	2.35	1.17	.82	.69	
Supportive	3.64	.9	.51	.55	
Accepting	3.68	.92	.57	.51	
Respectful	3.51	1.11	.69	.75	
Navigating Relationships					.83
My asexuality is an obstacle within partner relationships	2.75	1.24	-0.06	1.52	
My asexuality hinders the development of potential partner relationships	2.62	1.26	-0.04	1.58	
Finding a partner is difficult	2.15	1.14	-.18	1.26	
My chances of finding a partner are low	2.23	1.29	.05	1.64	
Navigating Relationships: Desires					.93
Companionship	4.75	.66	.54	.14	
Intellectual intimacy	4.51	.79	.51	.37	
Emotional connection	4.72	.66	.56	.11	
Security	4.49	.82	.57	.34	
Comfort	4.69	.70	.60	.13	
Commitment	4.38	.90	.60	.45	

Support	4.70	.66	.56	.12
Respect	4.74	.67	.53	.17
Emotional intimacy	4.61	.77	.62	.22
Affection	4.41	.89	.58	.45

A final EFA including all a-priori factors was performed using varimax rotation. The communalities table showed that all items loaded significantly (table 9.5).

Table 9.5 Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
My asexuality is an obstacle within partner relationships	.538	.580
My asexuality hinders the development of potential partner relationships	.558	.637
Finding a partner is difficult	.529	.582
My chances of finding a partner are low	.445	.424
Companionship	.668	.684
Intellectual intimacy	.464	.425
Emotional connection	.742	.742
Security	.554	.504
Comfort	.745	.744
Commitment	.471	.467
Support	.720	.716
Respect	.648	.610
Emotional intimacy	.680	.643
Affection	.486	.439
Unable to understand	.409	.373
Dismissive	.488	.462
Rejecting	.692	.638

Unaccepting	.677	.632
Disbelieving	.503	.497
Supportive	.597	.479
Accepting	.661	.566
Respectful	.511	.501
Not a legitimate orientation	.388	.415
Sexually repressed	.495	.574
Unfeeling	.388	.398
Prudes	.491	.561
Late bloomers	.506	.594
The asexual community acted as a source of support when discovering the asexual orientation	.614	.675
The asexual community acted as a source of comfort when discovering the asexual orientation	.621	.677
The asexual community allowed me to share my experiences when discovering the asexual orientation	.554	.600
The asexual community helped me to develop a sense of comradery when discovering the asexual orientation	.574	.642
I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation	.392	.528
Discovering the asexual orientation allowed me to better understand my lack of sexual attraction	.366	.470
Discovering the asexual orientation helped me to accept my differences	.391	.520
I conceal my asexuality	.508	.609
I do not present myself as asexual to others	.528	.669
I am not openly asexual	.512	.615

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi 2(N = 825) = 16208.78$ ($p < 0.000$) and KMO was 0.87. The factor solution derived from this analysis yielded

seven factors for the scale and accounted for 64.51% of variation in the data. Examination of the scree plot (figure 9.1) and factor matrix confirmed that the seven-factor solution provided best fit. The factor loading matrix is presented in table 9.6.

Figure 9.1 Scree Plot

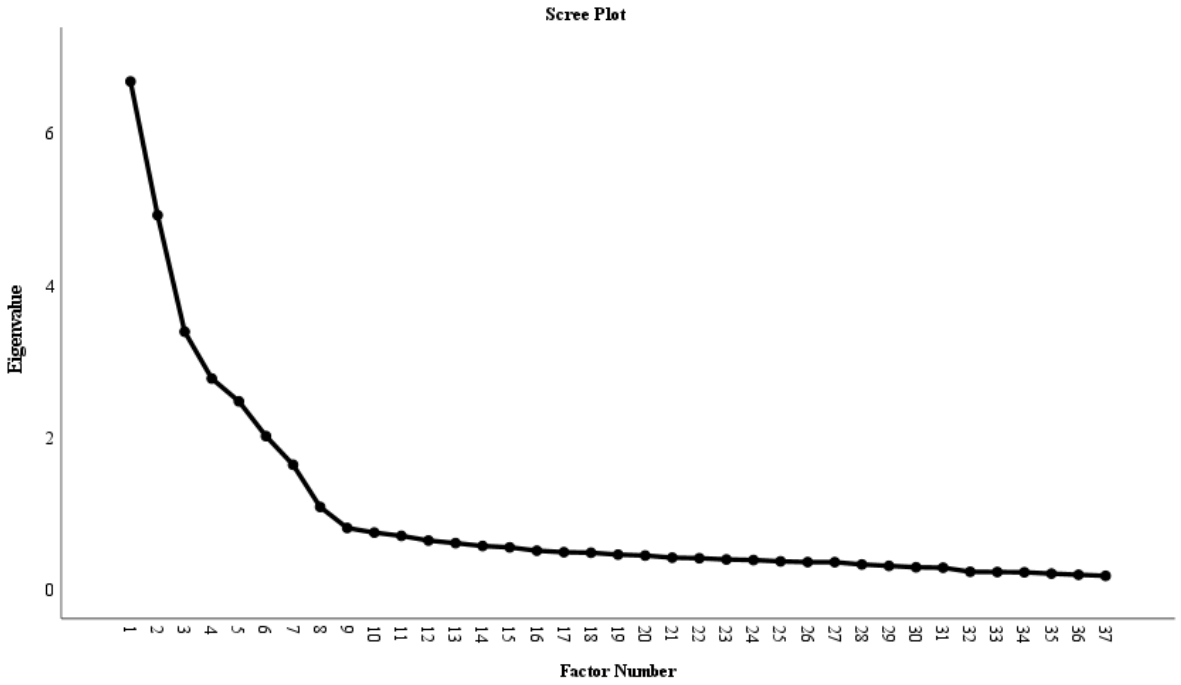


Table 9.6 Factor Matrix

	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Comfort	**.819**	.244	-.103	.029	-.019	-.002	-.024
Emotional connection	**.816**	.218	-.153	.020	-.059	-.021	-.035
Support	**.813**	.202	-.106	.011	-.039	.015	-.024
Companionship	**.783**	.184	-.175	-.035	.003	.014	-.073
Emotional intimacy	**.762**	.206	-.114	.012	-.066	-.021	-.042
Respect	**.753**	.173	-.101	.006	-.043	.010	.009
Security	**.691**	.121	-.079	.046	.002	.038	.047
Commitment	**.642**	.208	-.069	.078	.014	-.020	.012
Intellectual intimacy	**.633**	.103	-.086	.016	-.036	.006	.064
Affection	**.609**	.219	-.068	.021	-.097	-.031	-.068
Rejecting	-.283	**.691**	.021	-.276	.041	-.006	-.040
Unaccepting	-.276	**.679**	.019	-.294	.073	-.054	-.030
Disbelieving	-.218	**.636**	.054	-.170	.075	.085	-.016
Accepting	-.032	**.601**	.256	-.352	.113	-.030	.027
Dismissive	-.234	**.600**	.080	-.152	.114	.073	-.016
Respectful	-.057	**.592**	.170	-.325	.089	.002	.075
Supportive	.019	**.558**	.240	-.325	.055	-.012	.036
Unable to understand	-.224	**.538**	-.006	-.135	.075	.085	-.048
The asexual community acted as a source of support when discovering the asexual orientation	.241	-.143	**.665**	.095	.200	.234	-.226

The asexual community helped me to develop a sense of comradery when discovering the asexual orientation	.225	-.121	**.656**	.036	.257	.177	-.217
The asexual community acted as a source of comfort when discovering the asexual orientation	.242	-.137	**.654**	.026	.289	.214	-.207
The asexual community allowed me to share my experiences when discovering the asexual orientation	.264	-.130	**.648**	.156	.131	.119	-.196
Late bloomers	-.134	.310	-.188	**.553**	.350	.128	-.013
Prudes	-.146	.335	-.182	**.531**	.297	.156	.012
Sexually repressed	-.191	.354	-.199	**.502**	.327	.105	.040
Not a legitimate orientation	-.130	.306	-.152	**.443**	.280	.075	.023
Unfeeling	-.163	.325	-.240	**.370**	.265	.025	-.018
My asexuality is an obstacle within partner relationships	-.107	.263	.223	.243	**-.556**	.279	.062
My asexuality hinders the development of potential partner relationships	-.092	.294	.255	.287	**-.555**	.291	.042
Finding a partner is difficult	-.221	.233	.210	.243	**-.538**	.262	.132
My chances of finding a partner are low	-.026	.288	.153	.231	**-.472**	.188	.074
I am not openly asexual	-.083	.224	.270	.252	-.161	**-.612**	-.147

I do not present myself as asexual to others	-.024	.199	.328	.304	-.118	**-.607**	-.217
I conceal my asexuality	-.102	.280	.205	.320	-.162	**-.585**	-.081
Discovering the asexual orientation helped me to accept my differences	.197	.002	.389	.068	.114	-.124	**.545**
I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation	.164	-.090	.375	.115	.187	-.152	**.530**
Discovering the asexual orientation allowed me to better understand my lack of sexual attraction	.213	-.022	.318	.016	.191	-.085	**.528**

9.4.3 *Confirmatory Factor Analysis*

In the following phase of analysis, CFA was used to verify the factor structure (Suhr, 2006) and test hypotheses generated through EFA (Henson & Roberts, 2006). A separate dataset was used when completing this stage of the analysis to avoid sample specific chance relationships and to confirm or reject the factor pattern (Flora & Flake, 2017). A correlated factors model was fitted to the data using SPSS's statistical package titled AMOS (Arbuckle, 2015). The factor structure obtained from EFA was assessed and validated using maximum likelihood CFA with the second dataset (N = 826). For the purpose of model identification, loadings for the first item of each factor and item residuals were fixed to 1.0 (Rhudy et al., 2020). Initial results showed that standardised factor loadings were above 0.5 and did not need to be removed prior to assessing the model fit (Hamid et al., 2022).

Overall fit for the initial model (M1) was determined through multiple goodness-of-fit indices (Boley et al., 2014; Wan et al., 1996) including absolute fit indices, incremental fit indices and parsimony fit indices. The CFA revealed good model fit for the following fit indices: CMIN/DF = 4.34 and SRMR = 0.046. Although the chi-square statistic was notably high and significant: $\chi 2$ (608) = 2640.38($p < 0.000$), this was attributable to the large sample size (Boley et al., 2014). As a result, this indicator was substituted for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI), which are less sensitive to large sample size (Boley et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2010). Despite this, several fit indices were poor or did not meet criteria for good model fit: RMSEA = .064, CFI = 0.89, NFI = .857, GFI = .843, AIC = 2330.38 and BIC =3278.46 (Boley et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999) (see table 9.7).

Table 9.7 Model Indices

Model	**Chi-Square ($\chi 2$)**	**DF**	**RMSEA**	**CFI**	**CMIN/DF**	**NFI**	**GFI**	**AIC**	**BIC**
Model 1 (M1)	2640.38	608	.064	.886	4.34	.857	.843	2830.38	3278.46
Model 2 (M2)	2140.91	607	.055	.914	3.53	.88	.873	2332.91	2785.71
Model 3 (M3)	1962.44	606	.052	.92	3.24	.89	.88	2156.44	2613.95
Model 4 (M4)	1873.09	605	.05	.93	3.09	.89	.89	2069.09	2531.32
Model 5 (M5)	1767.41	604	.048	.94	2.93	.91	.89	1965.41	2432.35

Model 6 (M6)	1570.08	603	.04	.95	2.60	.92	.90	1770.08	2241.74
Model 7 (M7)	1491.88	602	.04	.95	2.48	.92	.91	1693.88	2170.25
Model 8 (M8)	1426.50	601	.04	.95	2.37	.92	.91	1630.50	2111.59
Model 9 (M9)	1318.84	600	.038	.96	2.20	.93	.92	1524.84	2010.65

DF, degrees of freedom; M1, initial model; M9, final model

Adequate model fit was obtained through model re-specification based on the modification indices (Byrne, 2001). This involved re-specifying error covariances that contributed substantially to model misspecification as free parameters (Abubakari et al., 2012) (see table 9.8).

Table 9.8 Error Covariances

Model	**Error Covariances**	**Items**
Model 2 (M2)	e7 - e11	Unaccepting - Supportive
Model 3 (M3)	e3 – e4	Finding a partner is difficult – My chances of finding a partner are low
Model 4 (M4)	e25 – e26	Security - Comfort
Model 5 (M5)	e7 – e8	Accepting - Respectful
Model 6 (M6)	e11 – e8	Respectful - Supportive
Model 7 (M7)	e24 – e30	Emotional Connection – Emotional Intimacy
Model 8 (M8)	e30 – e31	Emotional Intimacy - Affection
Model 9 (M9)	e5 – e9	Unaccepting - Rejecting

Thus, the model was modified by correlating the residuals of the highest modification indices in the eight successive CFA models. These modifications

provided a significant improvement in the resulting CFA model without changing the structure of item factor loadings. Invariance of the model was evaluated using the χ^2 difference test ($\Delta\chi^2$), with a decrease in χ^2 indicative of non-invariance (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Rhudy et al., 2020). However, considering the large simple size, alternative measures of non-invariance were also used (Byrne et al., 2007; Chen, 2007). This included a decrease in CFI ≥ to 0.005 and an increase in RSMEA ≥ to 0.01. Model 9 showed a substantial increase in model fit for all fit indices (RMSEA = .038, CFI = 0.96, CMIN/DF = 2.20 and SRMR = 0.039) and a notable increase in fit compared to model 1 (Δ RMSEA = .026, Δ CFI = .074). Thus, invariance was demonstrated as evidenced by improvements in both CFI and RMSEA. Fit statistics for models 1 to 9 are presented in table 9.9.

Table 9.9 Invariance Fit statistics

Model	**Fit Indices**					**Model Comparison**	**Δ RMSEA**	**Δ CFI**
	χ2	**df**	**P**	**RMSEA**	**CFI**			
Model 1	2640.38	608	<.0.000	.064	.886			
Model 2	2140.91	607	<.0.000	.055	.914	2 vs 1	.009	.028
Model 3	1962.44	606	<.0.000	.052	.924	3 vs 2	.003	.010
Model 4	1873.09	605	<.0.000	.050	.929	4 vs 3	.002	.005
Model 5	1767.41	604	<.0.000	.048	.935	5 vs 4	.002	.006
Model 6	1570.08	603	<.0.000	.044	.946	6 vs 5	.004	.011
Model 7	1491.87	602	<.0.000	.042	.950	7 vs 6	.002	.004
Model 8	1426.50	601	<.0.000	.041	.954	8 vs 7	.001	.004
Model 9	1318.84	600	<.0.000	.038	.960	9 vs 8	.003	.006
Model 9						9 vs 1	.026	.074

Standardised factor loadings of all items included in Model 9 were high or moderate (see table 9.10).

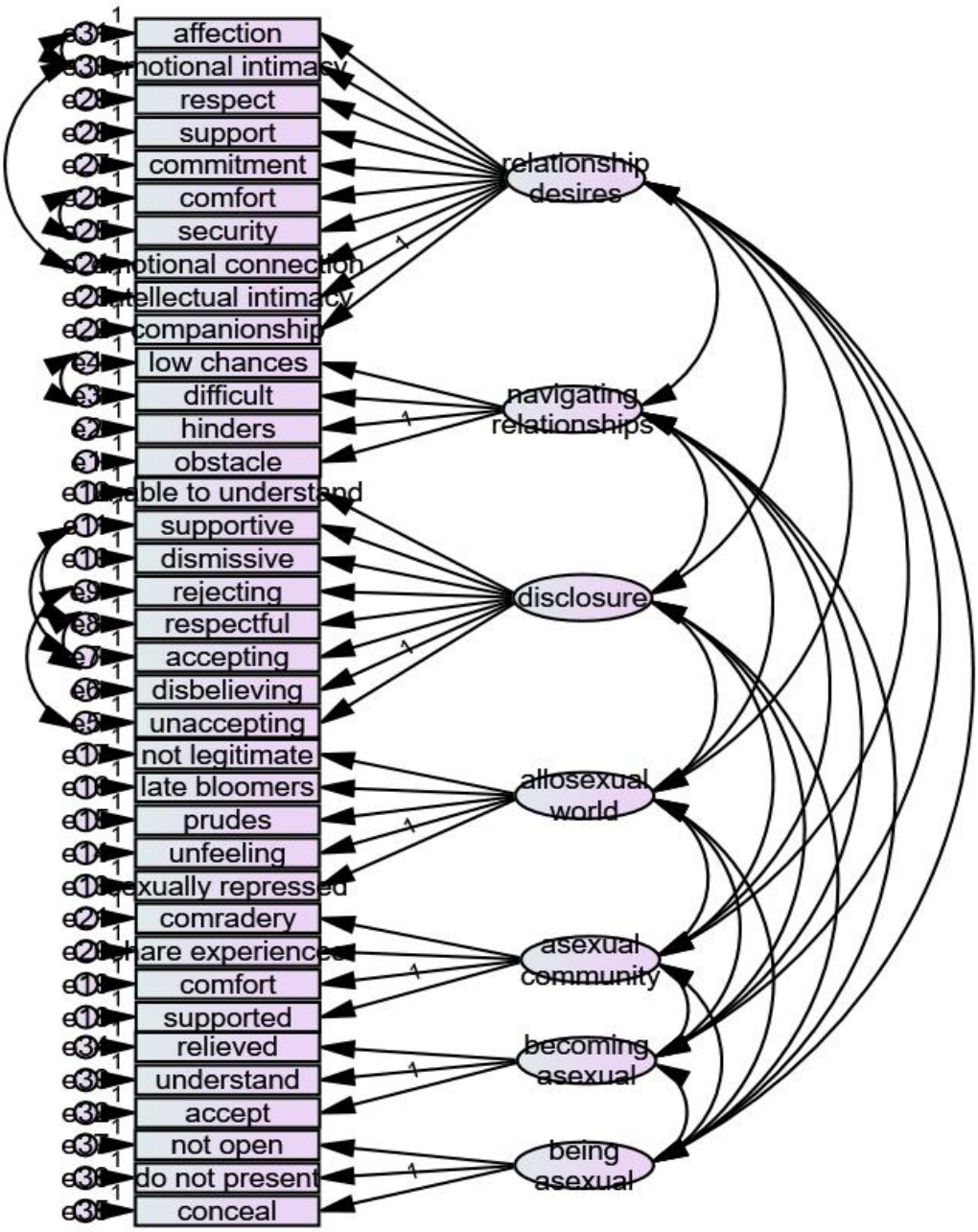
Table 9.10 Factor Loadings M9

Factor, Item	Mean (SD)	ω	Standardised Factor Loadings
Navigating Relationships: Desires		.93	
Emotional Connection	4.69 (.688)		.87
Comfort	4.61 (.740)		.85
Support	4.64 (.703)		.86
Companionship	4.72 (.647)		.86
Emotional Intimacy	4.56 (.797)		.72
Respect	4.72 (.666)		.83
Security	4.34 (.903)		.65
Commitment	4.33 (.933)		.68
Affection	4.34 (.947)		.64
Intellectual Intimacy	4.56 (.735)		.72
Disclosure		.89	
Unaccepting	2.98(1.12)		.78
Disbelieving	2.32(1.12)		.78
Accepting	3.51(.90)		.54
Respectful	3.39(.99)		.54
Rejecting	3.02(1.17)		.75
Dismissive	2.27(1.12)		.81
Supportive	3.47(.88)		.47
Unable to understand	2.14(.98)		.68
Being Asexual		.88	
conceal my asexuality	3.05 (1.247)		.82
not openly asexual	3.02 (1.338)		.81
do not present	3.01 (1.209)		.88

Asexual Community		.72	
Source of support	3.52 (1.145)		.86
source of comfort	3.79 (1.110)		.85
Comradery	3.66 (1.143)		.81
Share experiences	3.49 (1.111)		.81
Navigating Relationships		.83	
Hinders	2.44 (1.204)		.94
Obstacle	2.51 (1.197)		.73
Finding is difficult	2.10 (1.152)		.63
Chances are low	2.27 (1.307)		.57
Being in an Allosexual World		.85	
Late bloomers	1.84 (.967)		.77
Prudes	1.97 (1.010)		.81
Sexually repressed	1.89 (.916)		.81
Unfeeling	2.29 (1.080)		.65
Not Legitimate			.65
Becoming Asexual		.72	
Better Understand	4.30 (.987)		.65
Relieved	4.12 (1.063)		.65
Accept Differences	4.28 (1.038)		.75

All subscales had an ω value greater than 0.7 and indicated good to excellent internal consistency. Based on the large sample size, acceptable measures and path diagram, it is concluded that the AAID is good model fit (see figure 9.2). A complete version of the 37-item AAID can be found in Appendix IV.

Figure 9.2 Path Diagram


affection
notional intimacy
respect
support
commitment
comfort
security
otional connection
tellectual intimacy
companionship
low chances
difficult
hinders
obstacle
ble to understand
supportive
dismissive
rejecting
respectful
accepting
disbelieving
unaccepting
not legitimate
late bloomers
prudes
unfeeling
xually repressed
comradery
are experiences
comfort
supported
relieved
understand
accept
not open
do not present
conceal
relationship desires
navigating relationships
disclosure
allosexual world
asexual community
becoming asexual
being asexual

9.5 Discussion

Despite a growing interest among researchers in asexuality and the processes that underly asexual people's experiences, little attention has been given towards statistical examination of the asexual population and the development of a psychometric tool to describe this. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop a valid and reliable measure to quantitatively assess processes associated with identity development among asexual individuals. The AAID was developed through a series of steps including the creation of an initial item pool, evaluation of the relevance and content validity of each item, and subsequently, factor analysis to facilitate the selection of final items. This provided preliminary support for the psychometric soundness of the AAID and its suitability as a theoretically based, multidimensional measure of the processes that surround asexual identity development. This was evidenced through high levels of internal consistency among items, as well as good model fit and acceptable factor loadings. A major innovation of the AAID is its availability for use among people who identify along the asexual spectrum and report various romantic and gender identities. This enables researchers to integrate the AAID within broader investigations on asexuality without being constrained to asexual-allosexual dichotomies. Furthermore, this aligns with the intent to develop a measure that does not negate the complexity of identification within the asexual community (Kelleher et al., 2022) and marginalise those who do not identify within a definitive category.

Rationale for the initial a-priori factor structure was achieved through a review of literature (Kelleher et al., 2022) and two qualitative studies examining the processes underlying the development of an asexual identity (Kelleher & Murphy,

2022a, 2022b). Moreover, examination of conceptual models of non-heterosexual identity development (e.g., Feldman & Wright, 2013; Hall et al., 2021; Meyer, 2007; Moradi et al., 2010; Parmenter et al., 2022), as well as measures of both asexual (e.g., Foster, 2017; Yule et al., 2015) and other non-heterosexual identities (e.g., Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Worthington et al., 2008), assisted in this process. It was hypothesised that the data used in CFA would fit the factor model established in EFA. When compared with model 1, the fit of model 9 was improved as evidenced by a decrease in CFI and increase in RMSEA. Moreover, factor analysis supported five of the originally proposed AAID factors and established the additional subscales "Navigating Relationships: Desires" and "Asexual Community". Although items were written to correspond with the dimension of "Internalisation", this factor was eliminated prior to factor analysis due to poor reliability. Thus, factor analysis uncovered seven interrelated but independent dimensions that underly the construct of asexual identity development – namely, (a) Being Asexual, (b) Becoming Asexual, (c) Asexual Community, (d) Being in an Allosexual World, (e) Disclosure, (f) Navigating Relationships and (g) Navigating Relationships: Desires.

The seven factors included in the AAID are consistent with features of both non-heterosexual (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Moradi et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2006; Worthington et al., 2008) and asexual identity development models (e.g., Kelleher et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a, 2022b; Robbins et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008a). Specifically, factors converged with dimensions of non-heterosexual identity exploration and integration (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Worthington et al., 2002, 2008), efforts to conceal or disguise one's sexuality (Meyer, 2007), as well as processes surrounding disclosure and social

support gained through non-heterosexual communities (Bregman et al., 2013; Cramer et al., 2018). Similarly, the underlying structure of the AAID aligned with current theorising and models of asexual identity development (Kelleher et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a, 2022b; Robbins et al., 2016). For example, the subscales "Being Asexual" and "Becoming Asexual" aligned with asexual developmental trajectories (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), and the subscale "Being in an Allosexual World" corresponded with the hidden nature of asexuality (Kelleher et al., 2022). Moreover, the subscales "Disclosure" and "Navigating Relationships" were consistent with asexual individuals' experiences of disclosing their identities and how they interpreted their relationships (Kelleher et al., 2022; Maxwell, 2017; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018). "Asexual Community" emerged as an independent subscale supporting the contention that developing a sense of community is instrumental in asexual individuals' recognition and acceptance of themselves as asexual (Kelleher et al., 2022; McInroy et al., 2020; Robbins et al., 2016). Similarly, "Navigating Relationships: Desires" was associated with asexual individuals' motivations to engage in relationships with partners (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021).

9.5.1 *Demographic Characteristics and Participant Distribution*

Findings suggest that a number of factors are related to asexuality including a greater number of female and gender non-binary identities, as well as a mostly white and relatively young sample that hail from Western societies. Moreover, the diverse range of romantic and gender identities present within our sample is indicative of asexuality as an especially diverse population. Similar to previous research

surrounding asexuality, participants included within this study were relatively young (Rothblum et al., 2020). This may be as a result of the resent ascent of the asexual community and the younger profile of participants exposed to online forums (Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the majority of participants identified as white/Caucasian and over half resided in the United States of America. This corresponds with the typical demographic profiles of asexual participants (Antonsen et al., 2020; Greaves et al., 2017), as well as findings from the Asexual Community Survey Summary Report (Weis et al., 2017). Participants were highly educated with few obtaining less than a high school degree. This aligns with findings from previous research in which the vast majority of asexual people have been shown to be highly educated (Antonsen et al., 2020).

Participants included within this study were mostly female or gender non-binary which corresponds with past research surrounding gender distributions within the asexual community. For example, our findings are similar to the prevalence of female and gender-non-binary identities reported within previous studies (Antonsen et al., 2020; Bogaert, 2004; Greaves et al., 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Rothblum et al., 2020; Zheng & Su, 2018) and again correspond with the lower number of male respondents included within the Asexual Community Survey Summary Report (Weis et al., 2017). Moreover, gender distributions identified within this study align closely with the 2016 Asexual Census and are comparable to other estimates of non-binary identities among asexual people (Brotto et al., 2010; Hinderliter, 2009; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Yule et al., 2013). The large proportion of female participants included within this study aligns with quantitative and qualitative investigations surrounding asexuality and may derive from both allonormative and heteronormative assumptions. For example, gender divisions seen

within the asexual community may be as a result of the societal expectation that men are more sexually active than women (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rothblum et al., 2020) and exposed to greater levels of stigmatisation (Bogaert, 2004). Moreover, the prevalence of gender non-binary participants may be attributable to asexual individuals' ability to explore their gender identities and the societal expectations of what this means (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). For example, as many asexual people do not engage in sexual intercourse and do not feel the need to attract a sexual partner, this may lessen the applicability of gender roles (Antonsen et al., 2020), and grant them the ability to understand their gender identities in non-traditional ways (Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, an absence of sexual attraction that typically determine gender presentations and a resistance towards the gender binary may provide asexual people with further freedom to explore their gender identities (Antonsen et al., 2020; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011).

The wide range of romantic identities included in this study is indicative of the heterogenous nature of the asexual community and corresponds with existing research. For example, Antonsen et al., (2020) found a high prevalence of romantic attraction within the asexual community, with 74% of participants reporting something other than an aromantic identity. Moreover, the presence of romantic attraction that extends beyond opposite and same-sex attractions has been shown throughout research (Brotto et al., 2010; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Scherrer, 2008), with asexual people found to be less gender specific in their romantic interests (Antonsen et al., 2020). This corresponds with the diverse nature of asexuality and the higher prevalence of biromantic, homoromantic, panromantic, aromantic and unspecified identities (Antonsen et al., 2020; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Scherrer,

2008; Zheng & Su, 2018). This range of romantic attractions may be interpreted through asexual participants' ability to reject gender binaries (Gazzola & Morrison, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015) and develop sexual and romantic attraction independently of sex/gender (Brotto et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2008).

9.5.2 *Limitations and Future recommendations*

Although the present study informs research and practice in a number of ways, findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. To begin, the results of this study may be influenced by sampling bias and the selection of participants who are highly motivated to participate in research about asexuality. Although recruitment was not limited geographically, the prevalence of participants from democratic countries means that findings are not generalisable outside of this population. This likely resulted in lower variability and mean levels of several AAID items than would have been found in a more diverse group. Thus, future research should cross validate the factor structure, reliability, and validity of the AAID with samples that consist of racially and ethnically diverse participants. Moreover, follow-up studies may indicate whether the AAID is an appropriate measure to assess differences in identity development across varying gender and romantic identities. For example, future studies should examine measurement invariance across identity sub-groups (i.e., gender and romantic identity) and determine whether the overall factor structure fits well for all groups. Comparison of AAID scores across asexual and allosexual groups may confirm whether the measure accurately examines features specific to asexual identity development. Moreover, evaluation of other psychometric properties such as test-retest reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity may ensure the representativeness and stability of the AAID.

Finally, future research should investigate the longitudinal measurement invariance of the scale to indicate whether the AAID is suitable for studies of identity development over time. This may shed further light on asexuality-specific developmental pathways and differentiate this from HSSD and SIAD (Brotto & Milani, 2022).

Chapter 10 Discussion

At its earliest conception, this PhD sought to examine the nature of asexuality and the experience of being asexual. The research aims and objectives outlined at the beginning of the thesis established a course of research that was shaped by an evolving awareness of asexuality and a growing understanding of the processes that underlie identity development. The PhD presented here details a series of academic articles examining features of asexual identity development and positions this in the context of both a heteronormative and allonormative society. Moreover, through the employment of multiple research methodologies, these articles explore the heterogenous nature of asexuality and provide insight into the intersection of multiple identities. For example, study one, "*Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence*" (Kelleher et al., 2022) outlined key events and sense-making processes underlying asexual identity development and introduced the role that heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality play in this process. Study two, "*The Identity Development and Internalisation of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*" (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a), expanded upon these findings and corroborated key features and events surrounding identity development, as well as how some asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards them. Study three, "*Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis*" (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b), focused on the heterogenous nature of asexuality and developed upon the personal and societal factors influencing asexual identities. Finally study four, "*Measuring Features of Asexual Identity Development: The Development and Validation of a Psychometric Scale*", provided

statistical examination of the asexual population and created the first psychometric tool to accurately describe asexual individuals' experiences.

While each study may be considered individually, together they examine factors influencing asexual individuals' identities, as well as how they interpret societal constructs surrounding their lack of sexual attraction. When combined, these studies portray participants' efforts to navigate interpersonal interactions and the development of a positive sense of identity, as well as how they internalise their asexuality. In this chapter, I discuss the body of knowledge generated throughout this thesis and the implications of my research in relation to its aims and objectives. I also consider the limitations of each study and provide suggestions for future research.

10.1 Key Findings and Contributions

Building on the work of Erikson (1968), I formed my initial conceptualisation of sexual identity as an individual's attitudes, values and beliefs that relate to their sexuality. Specifically, this involves "identity integration" whereby an individual recognises their sexuality and subsequently expresses and explores that identity (Dillon et al., 2011; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987). Moreover, I understood the inability to integrate or develop a firm sense of identity as "identity diffusion" (Erikson, 1968), whereby an individual garners a sense of inauthenticity or invalidity surrounding their sexual orientation. Models of non-heterosexual identity have expanded upon Erikson's initial theory and introduced "identity formation" as the process of exploring and becoming aware of one's sexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Troiden, 1989). Furthermore, they extended upon identity integration as a continuum of sexual identity formation,

whereby an individual accepts and commits to their sexual orientation (Kroger, 2015; Rosario et al., 2006, 2011). Examples of this include engaging in non-heterosexual related social activities, working through any negative attitudes associated with their orientation and disclosing their sexual identity to others (Rosario et al., 2006, 2011). Although our understanding of the processes that underlie sexual identity has progressed beyond Erikson's theory of identity development, the concepts of identity formation and integration are still seen throughout research (Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rosario et al., 2006; Troiden, 1989).

10.1.1 *Asexual Identity Development*

Scholarship surrounding sexuality has evolved over the past century (Hall et al., 2021), with an increasing awareness of the multifaceted nature of sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011). Although initially, theories on sexual minority identity focused primarily on linear or stage-based models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), more recent theories offer a less universal understanding of sexual identity development (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994), and account for varying experiences and sub-identities (Dillon et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2021; Parmenter et al., 2022; Savin-Williams, 2006). Despite this, several features of Cass's (1979) Homosexual Identity Formation Model are seen within research on asexuality and remain relevant to our understanding of the orientation. For example, aspects of the Cass model such as "Identity Confusion" and "Comparison" were seen throughout participants' accounts of discovering their lack of sexual attraction and later acknowledgement of their asexual identities. Moreover, participants' willingness to disclose their asexuality and involvement in the asexual community closely resembled features of "Identity

Pride" and "Synthesis" outlined within the later stages of Cass's model. This also corresponded with several subscales outlined in the AAID and the way in which many asexual people come to develop a sense of identity.

Processes of exploring, integrating and committing to an asexual identity also compared to more recent models of both non-heterosexual (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) and heterosexual (e.g., Worthington et al., 2002, 2008) identity development. For example, the AAID yielded similar features to the Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment (Worthington et al., 2008) and accounted for processes surrounding "Exploration" (i.e., Becoming Asexual) and "Synthesis/Integration" (i.e., Being Asexual). Moreover, the factor structure of the AAID reflected processes surrounding the discovery of a non-heterosexual identity (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Mohr & Kendra, 2011; Moradi et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2006), as well as key aspects of asexual identity development outlined within research (e.g., Kelleher et al., 2022; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a, 2022b; Robbins et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008). Equally, a supportive environment and sense of community was shown to enhance the recognition of asexual individuals' identities and corresponded with the role of group membership in other models of non-heterosexual identity development (e.g., Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Several aspects unique to asexual identities found in this thesis coincided with features of asexuality outlined within literature (Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). For example, participants' negative understanding of their lack of sexual attraction appeared to stem from social comparison and an awareness of asexuality as outside societal norms (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). Moreover, a sense of invisibility and the relatively hidden nature of asexuality was shown to

impede participants' identification as asexual. This lack of awareness surrounding asexuality, as well as limited social availability, may again be attributed to allonormativity and the belief that everyone experiences some form of sexual attraction. This also highlighted the role of asexual communities within participants' identity development and the opportunity to access information online (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). Finally, the process of disclosing one's sexual identity appeared as a uniquely challenging experience among asexual individuals. Again, this may be attributed to the relatively unknown nature of asexuality and allonormative assumptions (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

As mentioned previously, the findings of this thesis corroborate our understanding of asexual identity development as a non-linear and less universal process (Parmenter et al., 2022). Specifically, themes outlined within each study highlight the development of participants' identities as subject to their interactions with others, as well as their environments. This confirms a departure from stage-based models and brings into further consideration sexual identity development as both an independent and multifaceted process (Galliher et al., 2017; Kennon, 2021; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Worthington et al., 2008). Moreover, applying a social constructionist perspective when interpreting the findings of this thesis allowed for a more complex understanding of asexuality and the integration of multiple aspects of participants' identities. According to Hall et al., (2021), while there are commonalities that exist within the asexual community, there are also diverse trajectories across groups. This is evidenced through discrepancies in the experiences that surround participants' asexuality and the implications of their romantic and gender identities.

10.1.2 *The Asexual Community as Heterogenous*

As outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, I formed my initial conceptualisation of the asexual community as heterogenous with the presence of multiple sub-identities (Clark et al., 2022; Hille et al., 2020). Specifically, I recognised romantic orientation as an independent facet of asexual individuals' identities and distinguished sexual and romantic attraction. Furthermore, I acknowledged the existence of non-normative genders and various ace identities within the asexual population and the implications that this may have on identity development (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Schudson & van Anders, 2019). Equipped with this understanding, I endeavoured to further my knowledge of asexuality and demonstrate the spectrum of identities that underly the orientation (Brown et al., 2022). Examining the diversity of the asexual population contributed towards my understanding of asexuality and allowed me to better design and implement each study included in this thesis.

Consistent across studies were a diverse range of sexual, romantic and gender identities. For example, a review of the available literature (study one) highlighted the relatively heterogenous nature of study populations and emerging efforts to differentiate romantic and sexual attraction within research (Kelleher et al., 2022). This trend was further outlined within my first empirical paper (study two), as I examined the presence of various romantic identities among female participants. In this study, it was apparent that participants' romantic attractions shaped the disclosure of their orientation, relationship desires and negotiations (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). This corresponds with trends across literature, as well as an understanding of asexual people as a heterogenous group (Vares, 2018; Weis et al.,

2017; Zheng & Su, 2018). Studies three (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b) and four captured a clearer picture of the asexual populations' diverse nature, with a more expansive overview of participant demographics. For example, both studies included a significant number of gender non-binary participants, as well as varying sexual and romantic sub-identities. This shed further light on the diversity that exists within the asexual community (Clark & Zimmerman, 2022; Hille et al., 2020) and confirmed my conceptualisation of asexuality as an "umbrella" term (Brown et al., 2022; Przybylo, 2013).

The presence of multiple sub-identities in each study encouraged to me examine asexual identity development through a "multidimensional" or intersectional lens. This allowed me to account for the various domains of identity in asexual individuals' experiences, as well as further outline sub-group variations and the heterogeneity of the asexual population. Furthermore, I implemented a social constructionist approach to identity development, positing that participants' sense of sexual identity is socially constructed and formed based on information available to them (Kennon, 2021; Rust, 1992). For example, I considered how the heterogeneity of sexual and romantic attraction, as well as gender diversity, impacts participants' sense of identity and how they navigate interpersonal interactions. Moreover, I examined how societal expectations and assumptions of allonormativity shaped participants' understanding of their asexuality and lack of sexual attraction. This in turn provided a more complete understanding of the experiences underlying asexual identity development.

From the outset of this PhD research, the literature supported a recognition of asexual identity development as a multifaceted process (Kelleher et al., 2022). Findings from the scoping review highlighted discrepancies that were specific to

asexual individuals' gender and romantic identities and corresponded with evidence surrounding asexual individuals' negotiation of multiple minority statuses (Gupta, 2019). Moreover, this demonstrated the uniqueness of asexual participants' experiences, as well as how multiple social inequalities shaped their identity development (Carroll, 2020; Gupta, 2019). Evidence within literature also referred to the role of heteronormative and allonormative cultures in the construction of an asexual identity (Carroll, 2020), and corroborated the social constructionist perspective outlined at the beginning of this thesis. Specifically, negative sentiments held towards asexuality stemmed from participants' lack of sexual attraction and subsequently threatened their positive self-perceptions (Winer et al., 2022).

This recognition of the variability and nuances that exist in the asexual community was further outlined in study two. For example, the various romantic orientations reported by participants impacted the development of their asexual identities and the nature of their desired relationships. This in turn shaped their motivations to engage in romantic relationships, as well as how others reacted to the disclosure of their asexuality (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a). This intersection of romantic and sexual identities articulated within participants' accounts is again indicative of the multidimensional nature of asexual identity development (Carroll, 2020). Moreover, participants' reports of alienation, isolation, as well as the perceived invisibility of asexuality, may be attributed to heteronormative and allonormative assumptions. For example, allonormative ideals prevented participants from accessing information surrounding asexuality (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020) and caused them to internalise a negative understanding of their lack of sexual attraction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a).

Through a more expansive view of the asexual community, study three extended upon the intersection of gender and sexuality within asexual identity development. For example, heteronormative feminine and masculine sexuality contributed to the denial of participants' asexual identities, with gender impacting their experiences of dating, relationships, as well as their disclosure (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b). As seen in previous studies, female participants' asexuality was often dismissed as sexual passivity, with many expected to comply with traditional family structures (Carroll, 2020; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Parmenter et al., 2022). Further evidence of gendered sexual norms was seen in the questioning of male participants asexuality due to an assumption of inherent masculine sexual drive. This corresponds with previous research surrounding gendered sexual norms and the association of masculinity with sexual virility (Carroll, 2020; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Parmenter et al., 2022; Przybylo, 2013), as well as conservative discourses on female sexuality (Fahs, 2010; Gupta, 2019).

As the concluding study in this thesis, study four highlighted the wide distribution of gender and romantic identities present in the asexual community and further demonstrated asexuality as a spectrum. Despite this diversity, the AAID was shown to reliably measure features of identity regardless of an individual's sexual, romantic or gender expression, and this in turn indicated the relatively consistent nature of asexual identity development. Sample demographics did, however, demonstrate the extent to which participants identified as female. This aligned with gender distributions typically found in the asexual population (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022b; Weis et al., 2017) and again, may be interpreted through gendered norms and allonormative assumptions. Equally, the presence of a wide range of romantic attractions is consistent with asexual peoples' lack of sexual attraction and ability to

reject gender binaries and/or the confines of gender presentations (Antonsen et al., 2020; Gazzola & Morrison, 2012).

10.2 Strengths

Many of the strengths outlined in this PhD thesis relate to the use of multiple methodological techniques when studying the phenomenon of asexual identity development. For example, a combination of inductive approaches when creating initial items for the AAID contributed towards statistical robustness and accurate identification of content dimensions. Moreover, deriving conceptualisations from both non-heterosexual and heterosexual identity development models, as well as findings from an extensive literature review, assisted in the process of determining which variables to measure. Incorporating both IPA and thematic analysis when investigating the lived experiences of participants allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the processes that underly identity development and the ability to relate this to the broader asexual population. This contributed towards a growing recognition of the variability that exists in the asexual community and elicited the voices of a range of asexual people. Furthermore, this addressed a growing need to better understand the role of gender and romantic orientation in the development of non-heterosexual and asexual identities, and account for individual differences (Dillon et al., 2011; Homick & Platt, 2021; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a; Savin-Williams, 2006).

This multidimensional perspective was incorporated especially within the latter parts of my thesis, as I recognised gender, as well as sexual and romantic orientation as unique facets of asexual individuals' identities. By employing an intersectional approach to examining asexuality, I successfully outlined the personal

and societal factors that impact the development of participants' identities, as well as discrepancies that exist in their accounts. This in turn underlined the applicability of the AAID for use among individuals' who identify along the asexual spectrum and removed constraints associated with asexual-allosexual dichotomies. Moreover, by observing the heterogenous nature of the asexual population and paying particular attention to the influence of both a heteronormative and allonormative society, I addressed current recommendations in this field of study and successfully developed upon previous research.

Another strength seen throughout this thesis is my acknowledgement of the philosophical assumptions that underlie each study, as well as an awareness of my role as a researcher. For example, I took several measures to sensitively and accurately articulate information surrounding asexuality and endeavoured to de-problematise asexual identities and a lack of sexual attraction. This included careful consideration of the language used in each study and how participants' experiences were presented. As seen in studies two and three, I articulated my outsider perspective and repeatedly reflected on any preconceptions. Moreover, acknowledging a diversity of experiences and sub-identities enriched my knowledge of asexuality and helped me to avoid heteronormative and allonormative assumptions. For example, presenting the accounts of asexual individuals with varying romantic and gender identities enriched discussion surrounding the nuances of romantic life, as well as how heteronormative assumptions may impact asexual peoples' experiences. Moreover, acknowledging that some asexual people engage in sexual activity, have past sexual experiences and pursue romantic relationships in the absence of sex, helped me to avoid asexual erasure and denigration (Brunning & McKeever, 2021). This in turn allowed me to address concerns surrounding a lack of

recognition of asexuality within philosophical literature and minimised the portrayal of inaccurate or incomplete accounts of asexual people (Brunning & McKeever, 2021).

As mentioned previously, the AAID was shown to accurately measure features of asexual identity development regardless of romantic or gender identity. Development of the AAID concludes this extensive program of research on asexual identities, with psychometric analyses yielding evidence of reliability and validity. Ultimately, the AAID acts to examine dimensions of asexual identity development and may be applied to a host of additional research questions. This includes, but is not limited to, examining the relationship between asexual identity development, mental health issues and help-seeking; longitudinal studies assessing the nature and variability of asexual identities over time; investigating the integration of asexual identities and other identity statuses such as race/ethnicity, gender, and religion.

10.3 Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although the present thesis informs the literature in several ways, there are several limitations that should be noted. To begin, the generalisability of findings produced within this research is limited due to participant recruitment procedures. As participants were recruited through AVEN, this may have reduced the applicability of themes and representation of asexual people who are not exposed to asexual communities or other online forums. The predominant use of online communities to recruit participants within research (Kelleher et al., 2022) may have narrowed our assessment of the asexual population and withheld a comprehensive representation of asexual individuals' experiences (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022a, 2022b). Thus, future research should endeavour to elicit the voices of participants who are not

recruited through online communities and shed further light on the processes that underly the development of an asexual identity. This is particularly applicable to the factor structure of the AAID among individuals who are not aligned with asexual communities. For example, the subscale “asexual community” should undergo further psychometric testing to assess its reliability among this cohort.

Participants demographics in each study have limited the generalisability of findings. As participants were predominantly white and from Western or democratic societies, this may have excluded intersecting factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, education and geographical location. Future research should examine the impact of these intersecting identities in the accounts of asexual people to provide a more comprehensive insight into the multidimensional nature of participants’ identities (Abrams et al., 2020). Furthermore, future research should investigate the factor structure of the AAID among racially and ethnically diverse samples.

10.4 Conclusions

This thesis identifies current knowledge of asexuality and the sense-making processes that underlie asexual identity development. Each study included in this thesis provides a unique contribution to the literature on asexuality, as well as how we define and conceptualise asexual identities in research. Features of identity development correspond with both asexual and other non-heterosexual identity development models and corroborate our understanding of sexual identity as a multifaceted process that is subject to various sub-identities. Moreover, themes outlined in each study highlight the development of participants’ identities as based on their interactions with others and brings into consideration a less universal approach to understanding identity development.

Through an in-depth analysis of then-current literature, study one (chapter three) provides a theoretical framework for understanding asexuality and helps map research design and analytical procedures. As the first literature review of its kind, this study contributes significantly towards our understanding of the key events that underly the development of an asexual identity and provides an insight into the attitudes, values and beliefs that shape the experiences of asexual individuals. Furthermore, this research grants an awareness of the distinctions between romantic and sexual attraction, as well as how heteronormative and allonormative assumptions influence asexual individuals' identities. Study two (chapter five) examines the challenges faced by asexual women when developing a sense of identity and places this within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society. The themes included in this study provide evidence of convergence and divergence that appear specific to gender and romantic identity and corroborate features of asexual identity development outlined within the scoping review. Through a thematic analysis of the accounts of 99 asexual individuals, study three (chapter seven) demonstrates the intersection of romantic and gender identities within the development of an asexual identity and provides further evidence to support this as a non-linear process. Moreover, focusing on the heterogenous nature of asexuality provides a more inclusive and scoping insight into asexual identity development and accounts for the complexity of this experience. Finally, study four (chapter nine) describes initial steps in the development of the AAID and demonstrates its availability for use among individuals who identify along the asexual spectrum and report various gender and romantic identities. As a psychometrically and theoretically grounded measure, the AAID provides a standardised way to assess features associated with

asexuality and in doing so, allows us to better understand the processes that surround asexual identity development.

As our awareness of asexuality continues to grow, so too does our interest in the experience of being asexual and the processes that surround the development of an asexual identity. Recognising varying developmental trajectories among asexual individuals and acknowledging the heterogenous nature of this group, contributes towards a more accurate way of defining asexuality and increases visibility of the asexual community.

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Appendix I – Charted Articles (Chapter 3)

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
1	Andersson (2010) Country = Sweden	Age: not specified Gender: Female (*N* = 5), Male (*N* = 1) Sample Size = 6	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Combined Analysis of Content Analysis, Interviews and Observations Collection: Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
2	Brotto et al., (2010) Country = Canada	Age: Range = 20-57 Gender: Male (*N* = 4), Female (*N* = 11) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships
3	Bulmer & Izuma (2018)	Age: Female (M = 21.11), Male (M = 21.82)	Study Design: Between Group Comparison Method of Analysis: Quantitative	Understanding Asexuality Individual Differences

	Country = United Kingdom	Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (*N* = 14), Male (*N* = 3), Other (*N* = 1) Gender (Control): Female (*N* = 23), Male (*N* = 4) Sample Size = 45 (18 Asexuals, 27 Controls)	Collection: Online questionnaire and paper questionnaire	
4	Carrigan (2011) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = Interviews (*N* = 8) online questionnaires (*N* = 130)	Study Design: Qualitative & Quantitative Design Method of Analysis: Mixed Method Collection: Interviews & Online Questionnaire	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences

5	Carvalho, Lemos & Nobre (2017) Country = Portugal	Age (Asexual Participants): Female (M=22.7, SD=4.8), Male (M=22.4, SD=4.1) Age (Control Participants): Female (M=22.5, SD=2.9), Male (M=22.4, SD=2.7) Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (*N* = 68), Male (*N* = 19) Gender (Control): Female (*N* =	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) Collection: Online Questionnaires	Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion

		58), Male (*N* = 19) Sample Size = 164 (91 Asexuals, 81 Controls)		
6	Dawson, Scott & McDonnell (2019) Country = Scotland	Age: 76% < 29 years of age, 24**%** ≥ 30 years of age. Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 50	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Symbolic Interactionist Theory Collection: Diary Writing and Interview Accounts	Negotiating Relationships
7	Deutsch (2018) Country = United States	Age: (M=22.27, SD=2.24) Gender: Female (*N* = 11) Sample Size = 11	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Analysis Collection: Semi-structured Interview	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate
8	Foster et al., (2019)	Age: Range = 18 - 51 (M =	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design	Understanding Asexuality

	Country = United States	25.9, Median = 22.5, SD = 10.14) Gender: Female (*N* = 5), Bio-female (*N* = 1), Cis-female (*N* = 2), Cis-woman (*N* = 1), 'Asexual' (*N* = 1) Sample Size = 11	Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Research Collection: Semi-structured Interviews	Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Individual Differences
9	Gupta (2017) Country = United States	Age: Range = 19 – 50 (M = 29, SD = 9.5) Gender: Female (70%), Male (23%), Trans woman (*N* = 1), Other (1) Sample Size = 30	Study Design: Qualitative Research Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: In-depth semi structured interview (in-person and over phone)	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences Isolation and Invisibility
10	Haefner			

Country = United States	Age: Range = 18 – 55, 18-21 (*N* = 29); 22-25 (*N* = 19); 26-30 (*N* = 8); 31-35 (*N* = 4); 36; 40 (*N* = 0); 41-45 (*N* = 1); 46-50 (*N* = 1); 51-55 (*N* = 1) *One participant did not give their age Gender: F (*N* = 37), M (*N* = 12), Agender (*N* = 9), Gender Queer (*N*= 8), Other (*N* = 6), Pangender (*N* = 1), Transgender (*N* = 1) Sample Size = 64	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory Collection: Two online surveys	Negotiating Relationships

11	Kurowicka & Pryzblo, (2019) Country = Poland	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size: Not Specified	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Not Specified Collection: Analysis of Online Forums (Sieć Edukacji Aseksualnej or SEA - translated as the Asexual Education Network)	Conservative Sexual Belief and Religion
12	MacNeela & Murphy (2015) Country = Ireland	Age: Range = 18 – 58 (M = 26.10, SD = 9.96) Gender: Female (31), Male (15), Other (18) unspecified (2) Sample Size = 66	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Online Questionnaires	Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility
13	Maxwell (2017) Country = United Kingdom	Age: < 30 **(***N* = 22), ≤ 35 (*N* = 4), >35 (*N* = 3) Gender: Female (*N* = 22), Male	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity

		(*N* = 7), Agender (*N* = 2), Non-gender (*N* = 5), Demi-female (*N* = 2), Cisgender (*N* = 12), Androgynous (*N* = 1) Sample Size (completed surveys) = 68 Sample Size (completed survey and interview) = 29	Collection: Online Surveys and Online Interviews.	Negotiating Relationships
14	McInroy et al., (2020) Country = United States of America & Canada	Age: Range = 14 – 24, Mean = 17.43 Gender: Non-binary (*N* = 306), Female (*N* = 214), Genderqueer (*N* = 169), Trans	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Quantitative Analysis, demographic analysis Collection: Online Survey	Coming to an Asexual Identity Disclosure Individual Differences

		Man (*N* = 127), Male (*N* = 42), Trans Woman (*N* = 12), Two Spirit (*N* = 11), Other (*N* = 9) Sample Size: 711		
15	Mitchell & Hunnicutt, (2019) Country = United States	Age: Not Specified Gender: Female (*N* = 6), Male (*N* = 2), M-questioning (*N* = 1), Agender (*N* = 1) Sample Size = 10	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative – not specified Collection: Modified life story narrative approach with an open-ended interview process	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
16	Mollet (2020) Country = United	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender,	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity

	States of America	Agender (*N* = 1); Cisgender Woman (*N* = 4); Agender, Transgender (*N* = 1); Agender, Transmasculine (*N* = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (*N* = 1); Nonbinary (*N* = 2); Cisgender Man (*N* = 2) Sample Size = 12	Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
17	Mollet (2021) Country = United States of America	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender, Agender (*N* = 1); Cisgender Woman (*N* = 4); Agender, Transgender (*N*	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded theory Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure

		= 1); Agender, Transmasculine (*N* = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (*N* = 1); Nonbinary (*N* = 2); Cisgender Man (*N* = 2) Sample Size = 12		
18	Robbins, Low & Query (2016) Country: United States	Age: Range = 18 – 25 (71%), 26 – 32 (20%), 33 and over (8%) Gender: Female (69%), Male (16%), Unidentified (15%) Sample Size = 169	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
19	Rossi (2017)			

	Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 20 - 45 Gender: Female (*N* = 8) Sample Size = 8	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: Interviews (skype, facetime and in-person)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences Disclosure
20	Rothblum et al., (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18 - 53 (M = 30, SD = 11.5) Gender: Non-binary (*N* = 3), Male (*N* = 3) Female (*N* = 21) Sample Size = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion
21	Rothblum et al., (2020)	Age: Range = 18 – 61	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design	

	Country: United States	91.19% (18 – 27) Gender: Female (27.74%), Male (0%), Gender-queer, non-binary (72.26%) Sample Size = 19	Method of Analysis: bivariate differences assessed between asexual and non-asexual sexual minorities Collection: Online Questionnaire	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
22	Savage (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18 – 28 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 5	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis (guided by Muted Group Theory and the Minority Stress Model) Collection: Semi-structured Interviews (in-person and online)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
23	Scherrer (2008)	Age: Range = 18 – 66 (M =	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design	Understanding the Asexual Self

	Country = United States	27.4, Median = 21) Gender: Female (*N* = 75), Male (*N* = 18), Transgender (*N* = 2), "not easily categorised" (*N* = 7) Sample Size = 102	Method of Analysis: Ethnography Collection: Online survey	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences
24	Dawson, McDonnell & Scott (2016) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = Majority 18 – 29, otherwise not specified Gender: Not specified Sample Size (Biographical Interview) = 50 Sample Size (two-week diaries) = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematically analysed using software program NVivo10 Collection: Biographical interview; two-week diaries	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
25	Sloan (2015)			Disclosure

	Country = United States	Age: Range = 19 - 34 Gender: Female (*N* = 10), Male (*N* = 2), Transgender Woman (*N* = 2), Transgender Man (*N* = 1) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative, not specified Collection: Interviews (in-person or via online messaging)	Negotiating Relationships
26	Van Houdenhove et al., (2015) Country = Belgium	Age: Range = 20 – 50 20-30 (*N* = 4), 31-40 (*N* = 3), 41-50 (*N* = 2) Gender: Female (*N* = 9) Sample Size = 9	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Semi-structured interviews	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Negotiating Relationships
27	Vares (2018) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18 - 60 Gender: Male and Female	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Discourse Analysis	Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility

		Participants (not specified) Sample Size = 13	Collection: Interviews (in-person and over phone)	
28	Vares (2021) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18 – 60 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Negotiating Relationships Stigmatisation and the need to Educate
29	Winter-Gray & Hayfield (2019) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = 18 - 35 (M = 22) Gender: Female (*N* = 33), Transwomen (*N* = 2), Male (*N* = 5), Transman (*N* = 3), Agender (*N* = 3), Gender-fluid (*N* = 2)	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Online Survey	Negotiating Relationships

Sample Size = 48

Appendix II – Interview Schedule (Chapter 5)

Opening the Interview/guide

The interview will begin with welcoming the interviewee/greeting them through skype and a brief estimation of time provided (approx. 45 – 60 minutes).

Body of Interview

- So as you know, today we will be discussing asexuality and I would like to know, what does that term mean to you? [cognition]
- How do you express this? [behavior]
- Can you tell me how you became aware of your sexual orientation? [awareness]
- And how did that happen? [context]
- Do you find that being asexual makes a difference to you in any way? [experience]
- Can you tell me what kind of relationships are of interest to you? [relationships]
- What would they be like? [nature of relationships]
- Can you tell me a bit about when your sexual orientation has had an influence in your life? [time context]
- Do you engage in sexual activity? [closed question]
- Have you told many people about your sexual orientation? [disclosure]

Can you tell me about that experience? [experiential]

- What was that like? [experiential]

Extra prompts:

- What was that like?
- What do you think that means?
- Tell me a bit more

Closing the Interview

The interview will end with a summary of the topics discussed and a brief discussion on the steps taken following the interview.

Appendix III – Open-ended Questionnaire (Chapter 7)

Open-Ended Questionnaire

Demographic questions:

Please state your age:

Please indicate your preferred gender (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Male
- Female
- Transwoman
- Transman
- Non-binary (third gender)
- Self-describe

Please state your preferred sexual orientation (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Asexual
- Grey-asexual
- Demisexual
- Self-describe

Please state your preferred romantic orientation (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Heteromantic
- Homoromantic

- Biromantic
- Panromantic
- Demiromantic
- Aromantic
- Greyromantic
- Self-describe

Open-ended Questions:

- What does the term asexuality mean to you?
- How do you express your asexuality?
- How did you become aware of your asexual orientation?
- Does being asexual make you feel different in any way?
- What sort of close, personal relationships are of interest to you?
- Has your sexual orientation ever had an influence in your life?
- How, if at all, do you think your life would have been different if you were not asexual?
- Do you engage in sexual activity? Can you elaborate on why you choose to engage or not engage in sexual activity?
- Have you told other people about your sexual orientation? If so, what was that experience like?

Appendix IV – AAID (Chapter 9)

Before completing this questionnaire please note the following: Some of you may prefer to use a label other than 'asexual' to describe your sexual orientation (e.g., demi-sexual, gray-asexual, sex-averse). We use the term asexual in this questionnaire as convenience and we ask for your understanding if this term does not completely capture your sexual identity.

Navigating Relationships: Desires

Please indicate on a scale of 1 – 5 how much the following words or phrases accurately describe what you hope to gain from a partner relationship: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)
*Partner Relationships: an intimate relationship that may involve emotional or physical intimacy

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Emotional Connection					
Comfort					
Support					
Companionship					

Emotional
Intimacy
Respect
Security
Commitment
Affection
Intellectual
Intimacy

Disclosure

Please indicate on a scale of 1 – 5 how much the following words or phrases accurately describe other people's reactions to coming out as asexual: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)

*Coming out as asexual: A process whereby asexual people share their identity openly with other people

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Unaccepting					
Disbelieving					
Accepting					
Respectful					
Rejecting					

Dismissive	
Supportive	
Unable to understand	

Being Asexual

For each of the following statements please mark the response which you feel best describes your current experience as an asexual person: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
I conceal my asexuality					
I am not openly asexual					
I do not present myself as asexual to others					

Asexual Community

Please indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 to what extent the following statements describe how you came to discover your asexuality? (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The asexual community acted as a source of support when discovering the asexual orientation					
The asexual community acted as a source of comfort when discovering the asexual orientation					
The asexual community helped me to develop a sense of comradery when discovering the asexual orientation					

The asexual community allowed me to share my experiences when discovering the asexual orientation					

Navigating Relationships

Please indicate on a scale of 1 – 5 how much the following statements accurately describe your experience of partner relationships: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree) *Partner Relationships: an intimate relationship that may involve emotional or physical intimacy

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
My asexuality hinders the development of potential partner relationships					
My asexuality is an obstacle within partner relationships					

Finding a partner is difficult					
My chances of finding a partner are low					

Being in an Allosexual World

Please indicate on a scale of 1 – 5 how you think allosexual people view asexual people: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree) *Allosexual People: People who experience sexual attraction of any kind (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual)

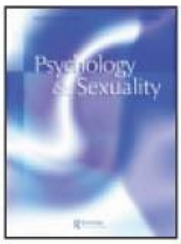
	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Late bloomers					
Prudes					
Sexually repressed					
Unfeeling					
Not a legitimate orientation					

Becoming Asexual

Please indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much the following statements accurately describe how you felt after discovering the asexual orientation: (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Discovering the asexual orientation allowed me to better understand my lack of sexual attraction					
I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation					
Discovering the asexual orientation helped me to accept my differences					

Appendix V – Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Qualitative and Quantitative Evidence



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Asexual identity development and internalisation: a scoping review of quantitative and qualitative evidence

Sinéad Kelleher, Mike Murphy and Xin Su

School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork Ireland

ABSTRACT

Individuals who do not experience sexual attraction and adopt an asexual identity are the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research. A scoping review was conducted to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. Findings from 29 articles were analysed and formed into themes that best describe the key events and sense-making processes underlying identity development, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their identity. These findings indicate that heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality play a role in how individuals internalise their asexuality, which in turn, shapes their identity development. Despite this, considerable gaps in the literature concerning partner relationships, stigmatisation, isolation and the impact that this has on asexuals' wellbeing continue to exist. Thus, future research should examine the challenges faced by asexuals such as identity development within a heteronormative and allonormative context and the resources available to ameliorate them.

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asexuality; identity; sexuality; internalisation; challenges

Personal identification and philosophical orientation

The authors acknowledge and accept that asexuality is valid and real. This research was conducted with the aim to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. In doing this, we seek to accurately and sensitively relay information surrounding asexuality and enrich our understanding of sexuality and the philosophy behind sex and sexual attraction. We believe that this research contributes towards a growing awareness and understanding of asexuality and may help to reverse myths and negative assumptions surrounding asexuality.

We believe that asexual experiences are diverse and accept the common definition of asexuality as a lack or absence of sexual attraction. We acknowledge that asexuality is not a behaviour, a form of celibacy or sexual desire disorder. We are also aware that many asexual people have romantic relationships and may engage in sexual activity. We recognise that the dismissal or stigmatisation of asexuality within everyday life may contribute towards psychological distress among asexual people and effect their identity development. We believe that our understanding of sex and sexuality can be enriched by studying asexuality.

Asexuality as a sexual identity has increased in profile partly due to the emergence of social media outlets, the development of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and a growth in academic attention, beginning with Bogaert's (2004) demographic analysis in which a 1% prevalence rate of asexuality was recorded within a British sample (N > 18,000). According

CONTACT Sinéad Kelleher sinead.kelleher@ucc.ie School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.
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to Cuthbert (2019), asexuality is becomingly increasingly recognised within non-heterosexual communities, mainstream media and popular culture. Because of this, asexuality has since been the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research (Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

Definitional issues

According to Laumann et al. (2000), researchers' interest in sexuality can be categorised under three separate headings – namely, behaviour, desire and identity. This can include the use of a description-based approach to identifying a sexual orientation (i.e. sexual attraction/desire towards individuals of the opposite or same sex), a behavioural approach (i.e. a lack of sexual behaviour), as well as self-identification. Beginning with Storms' (1980) two-dimensional model of sexual orientation, academic literature has most frequently defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction or low sexual desire (Bogaert, 2006; Brotto & Yule, 2017; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011). Although this definition is widely used within literature (Prause & Graham, 2007), it is important to recognise that asexual individuals have the potential for sexual arousal, can engage in sexual behaviours and be romantically attracted to others (Bogaert, 2006). For example, some individuals may identify as asexual but still experience sexual attraction or engage in sexual behaviour, while others may define their asexuality through abstinence from sexual intercourse (Poston & Baumle, 2010). This in turn, indicates that asexuality may exist along a spectrum, with many asexual individuals experiencing varying levels of sexual attraction and varying attitudes towards sexual activity (Hammack et al., 2019). Moreover, when defining asexuality within research, there is increasing interest in the role of sexual and romantic dimensions among participants (Scherrer, 2008). Therefore, all criteria used to identify asexuality within research will be accepted as relevant for the purpose of this review. This will better map the use of a focused definition within research.

The scope of current research

Research into the area of asexuality has evolved following Bogaert's (2004) initial study, with an increasing focus on the experience of being asexual and associated psychological characteristics. Prause and Graham (2007) initiated such investigation, through the comparison of both sexual and self-identified asexual individuals and the features that distinguished both groups. Through this investigation, Prause and Graham (2007) characterised asexuality as a lack of sexual desire directed towards others, with many participants reporting few to no sexual experiences. Their findings prompted the development of further investigation that focused on the lived experiences of asexual participants, and how this may allow us to better understand and define asexuality. In light of this, research has focused largely on characteristics associated with asexuality, with some indicating similarities between asexuality and other sexual minority identities (Scherrer, 2008). Specifically, such investigations have focused on aspects of asexuality such as commonalities within the community (Carrigan, 2011), coming-out processes (Robbins et al., 2016) and experiences of stigmatisation and polarisation (Chasin, 2015). Through this, research has shown a higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with asexual individuals (Yule et al., 2013), with many attributing this to the effects of discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Lucassen et al., 2011). For example, MacInnis and Hodson (2012, p. 738), reported anti-asexual bias held towards asexuals that was 'equivalent to, or even more extreme, than bias held towards homosexuals and bisexuals'. These negative sentiments held towards asexuality and a lack of acceptance from family, friends and professional misunderstandings (Chasin, 2015), appear to influence asexuals' self-concepts and the development of their asexual identities (McInroy et al., 2020). Thus, the process of integrating or internalising these sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming increasingly studied among asexual individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Scherrer, 2008).

Identity development

According to Keniston (1968) and Marcia (1987), identity is a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles, that is both organised and learned. Identity development is considered a critical psychosocial task across the lifespan (Keniston, 1968; McLean, Syed, McAdams et al., 2015) and is a constructed story of how an individual comes to be who they currently are (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity is believed to develop at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels and comprises of individual, relational and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). Specifically, identity development may be considered the construction of an individuals' self-conceptualisation (Sharma & Sharma, 2010) that is influenced by both cultural and societal factors (Misra, 2007), and is largely studied to determine well-being (Thoits, 2013).

Although identity development is considered to manifest during childhood and early adolescence (McLean, Syed, Fivush et al., 2015) it continues to develop and grow across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Thus, the development of an individual's identity can be considered an important lifelong process. According to Stryker (1980), identity involves the integration of 'blocks' which together, build a unified self-concept that enables a person to function with coherence. As such, the development of a positive and well understood identity involves building self-esteem, exploring self-definition, reducing self-discrepancies and fostering role formation and achievement (Tsang et al., 2012). Because of this, research is becoming increasingly concerned with recognising the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual identity development among sexual-minority individuals and specifically, asexual individuals (Morgan, 2013).

Asexual identity development

Sexuality is considered an aspect of one's identity that can shape their entire character (Kietzer, 2015) and is believed to be affected by both internal and external factors (Mayer et al., 2014). Sexual identity can be conceptualised as involving the cognitive and emotional understanding of an individual's sexuality, including sexual attractions, desires, behaviours, values and relationships (Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2011). This understanding assists in forming a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's sexual identity (Morgan, 2013) and involves negotiating feelings of instability and transitions, as well as heightened self-focus and identity exploration (Arnett, 2007). However, while sexual identity development for non-heterosexual individuals can be an opportunity for exploration and self-discovery, it can simultaneously be inhibited or contrived (Torkelson, 2012).

The development of an individual's sexual minority identity typically involves a process of becoming aware of themselves as different from their peers, identifying with an orientation that corresponds with their sexual and romantic attractions and disclosing their sexuality to others (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). According to Cass's (1979) Theory of Sexual Identity Formation, identity development among non-heterosexual individuals involves a process of questioning and becoming aware of one's sexuality, exploring that emerging identity and engaging in non-heterosexual related social and sexual activities (Cass, 1979). This process is believed to take time as individuals engage in self-questioning, experimentation and conflict (Rosario et al., 2006). The resulting identity integration is portrayed through both embracing and disclosing a non-heterosexual identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Despite the ongoing relevance of Cass's (1979) model, there is emerging evidence to suggest that sexual identity development does not follow a consistent route and is not stable from person to person (Morgan, 2013). Specifically, recent efforts have been made to account for the complex and dynamic nature of sexual identity to include a multidimensional model that operates at both an individual and societal level (Dillon et al., 2011).

Research suggests that there are many components specific to the development of an asexual identity that differ from the trajectory witnessed among other non-heterosexual groups (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, Robbins et al. (2016) proposed a model of identity development that

contains experiences unique to asexual individuals. Within this model they suggest that a lack of information causes many asexuals to initially question the legitimacy of their asexuality and pathologise their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, the discovery of an asexual identity is considered a unique process within this model as asexual individuals typically gain information through online resources and asexuality-specific communities. Finally, disclosure is considered a crucial element within this model as external validation and the opportunity to educate others facilitates identity integration (Robbins et al., 2016). Interestingly, when investigating asexual identity formation, Winer et al. (2022), found that approximately half of asexual individuals adopt other sexual identities earlier in their lives. In this respect, bisexuality and pansexuality may function as 'identity pathways' for many asexual individuals prior to the discovery of an asexual identity (Winer et al., 2022). Similar to the invisible nature of asexuality identified within previous models of identity development (Robbins et al., 2016), limited awareness of asexuality may cause many individuals to initially adopt a sexual identity that is more recognisable (Winer et al., 2022).

Asexual identity development and wellbeing

Sexual identity distress has been shown to significantly predict psychological distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Wright & Perry, 2006). Specifically, anti-queer attitudes and heterosexism, can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation and discrimination which in turn, can negatively affect their sexual identity development (Anderson, 2020; Craig et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014). Moreover, marginalisation as a result of sexual identity can lead to higher rates of suicidality and suicidal ideation (Di Giacomo et al., 2018), mental health disorders (Russell & Fish, 2016) and substance abuse (Day et al., 2017) among sexual minority youths. This evidence for the existence of stigma related prejudices against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population has recently been shown to include asexual individuals (Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). Because of this, the development of an asexual identity and the process of integrating or 'internalising' negative sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming an increasing focus of research.

During identity development, it is believed that an individual creates their self-image through experiences and associated meanings within their community (Jamil et al., 2009). However, as sexual minority youths are often raised within a predominantly heteronormative society, they do not necessarily encounter similar others and often lack an initial exposure to non-heterosexual communities (Rosario et al., 2006). As a result, they may gain an understanding of society's negative regard towards a non-heterosexual identity and may experience a different developmental trajectory (Morgan, 2013). Like other sexual minority individuals, asexual individuals are believed to internalise their existence outside of heteronormative ideals and standard life events, which in turn, shapes their identity development (McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, an increasing recognition of sex and sexual attraction as 'natural' and 'necessary' (Kennon, 2021) may further enhance the invisibility and oppression of asexual individuals. For example, 'allonormativity', or the assumption that that all people experience some form of sexual attraction, has been shown to hinder the development and management of asexual identities (Mollet, 2020, 2021). Thus, there is a growing need to address and understand how an asexual identity is constructed within the context of both a heteronormative (Morgan, 2013) and allonormative society (Mollet, 2021).

The current review

For the purpose of the current review, asexual identity development will be conceptualised with reference to both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models. This will encompass components of identity development such identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different; discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities;

and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others. Specifically, we will focus on empirical research that investigates identity development at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, as well as the societal and cultural factors that influence identity development.

This scoping review will bring together research which pertains to asexual identity development and internalisation, with an added focus on whether and how individuals internalise societal messages held towards their asexual identity. Moreover, this review will provide an insight into how individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and diverge from the dominant heterosexual culture and assumed developmental path develop their identities.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis of literature, the research questions directing this review are broad in nature and address the following topics:

- What empirical research, both published and unpublished, has been generated about the development of an asexual identity?
- What attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences specific to asexual individuals shape their self-concept and understanding of their asexual identity?
- What gaps are present within the literature and what is recommended for future progression within this area?

This investigation acts as a significant contribution to our understanding of the key concepts and common experiences underlying the internalisation and development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as the first literature review of its kind, it maps research designs and analytical procedures to direct future research agendas.

Methodology

Literature reviews utilising a scoping methodology are becoming increasingly prevalent (Moher et al., 2009), highlighting their success and capacity to bring together the research within an area. While there is currently no conclusive definition for a scoping review (Daudt et al., 2013), its main purpose is to provide an overview of a topic (Moher et al., 2015) through the syntheses of available grey and published literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review that is well executed, may make a substantial contribution to an area of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and is considered a rigorous form of literature review.

The broad nature of a scoping review allows for a more generalised research question and subsequent exploration of a wide range of associated literature (Moher et al., 2015). Therefore, this scoping review will allow for the inclusion of all relevant material without the limitations of specific methodological approaches or contexts, whether geographical, cultural or sex based. Moreover, scoping reviews endeavour to articulate what is currently known in an area, including in-depth investigation of key concepts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This is particularly fitting considering our limited understanding of asexual identity development and the way in which asexual individuals internalise their divergence from expected life events and societal norms. This scoping review will include studies that use varying methodologies and analytical approaches to consider what may be deemed a successful research design when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Furthermore, scoping reviews aim to present evidence relevant to a topic irrespective of study quality (Tricco et al., 2016) and are considered useful when mapping an area of research that is novel and emerging. Finally, as scoping reviews present information though mainly narrative presentations (Peterson et al., 2017), this will enhance reporting of the area under investigation, which is mainly qualitative or mixed in design, with limited statistical information. This scoping review will grant the exploration of a breadth of literature, mapping evidence in an assessable and unrestricted way to inform future research (Tricco et al., 2016).

Although relatively novel in nature, investigation surrounding asexuality has developed considerably over the past few decades and can be considered an emerging area of research. Specifically, research has focused on how individuals come to identify as asexual, navigate relationships and disclosure, seek support and integrate within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016). This growth in research poses many theoretical and methodological challenges when studying the development of an asexual identity, such as inconsistent definitions, limited demographic information and restricted gathering of participants through asexuality-specific communities (Mollet, 2020). Thus, this review aims to map the diversity of research questions, methodologies, analytical approaches and theoretical orientations, to identify key concepts and knowledge gaps surrounding the development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as this research aims to extract and synthesise evidence surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation, the participants identified within each included study should maintain some understanding of themselves as asexual. Studies which include participants that do not engage in sexual activity (e.g. members of religious sects) and do not identify as asexual, will not be included for review.

Method

Objectives and research question

The objective of this scoping review is to provide an insight into the attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences that shape the identity development of asexual individuals, as well as how they internalise societal messages held towards asexuality. This will involve review of both quantitative and qualitative evidence, which will direct the scope of future enquiry into the area of asexuality. Review questions included within this research take inspiration from the review title and as such, advise the formation of inclusion criteria (Khalil et al., 2016).

Identifying relevant studies

Context

The context of literature reviewed does not require a specific geographical location, nor specified cultural, racial or sex-based factors. The reviewed literature does not require a specific setting nor discipline. This review is concerned solely with the factors that contribute towards asexual identity development and internalisation.

Types of Participants

Studies which gather data from asexual individuals have been included. When defining asexuality, studies which used self-identification as asexual, behaviours indicative of asexuality (a lack of sexual behaviour) and those which defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others were considered appropriate to include. However, regardless of how each study defined asexuality, it was imperative that the participants included had an awareness of the self as asexual and interpreted their experiences through this lens. A specific romantic identity, age or gender category were not deemed factors requiring exclusion.

Types of Studies

Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were included if written in English and published after 1 January 2000. This cut-off point was considered appropriate as empirical research into asexuality comes predominantly from after this date (Bogaert, 2004).

Outcomes of this review

This review maps literature surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation. Specifically, this review outlines the experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs common among asexuals, such as coming-out, reactions of others and how they make sense of their asexual identities. In addition to this, methodological frameworks for studying asexuality and suggestions for future methodological approaches are outlined. The findings of this scoping review will be useful in informing the design and implementation of proceeding studies in asexuality and specifically those which focus on identity development and internalisation.

Search procedure

A librarian specialising in behavioural and social science literature advised on appropriate search strategies and identified relevant bibliographic databases. Specific databases were searched to increase the likelihood of obtaining all relevant studies that fall within the scope of this review. This consisted of the databases EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, MEDLINE, APA PsycArticles, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, APA PsycInfo), Taylor and Francis, PubMed and Springer. In addition to this, grey literature searches were conducted using multiple search engines and databases.

Search strategy

This review consisted of an extensive database search with carefully selected search terms, followed by the application of strict inclusion/exclusion criteria. Papers were excluded from review if they did not concern an asexual population or did not focus upon the identity development or internalisation (i.e. attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences) of asexual individuals. Following multiple database searches, 29 papers were identified from which to extract and synthesise evidence (Figure 1). The inclusion/exclusion procedure was phased in several separate stages, including the identification of relevant articles, the screening of each article for inclusion or exclusion and an independent cross-check of included articles by authors. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of 'asexuality' or 'asexual', 'beliefs', 'attitudes', 'experiences', 'identity' and 'value'. This review of literature was conducted across multiple timelines to ensure that the most recently published articles in the area were included in the final analysis.

1 January 2000–1 May 2019: A total of 294 papers were imported to the citation manager EndNote to allow for appropriate organisation of papers and to assist in the removal of duplicates. Following an initial removal of duplicates, 277 papers remained – it is important to note that this process did not immediately remove all duplicates and thus, further removal of duplicates was carried out later in the screening of papers. Using a checklist created prior to the screening process, author (SK) and a trained research assistant (XS) screened the remaining papers to determine eligibility. Most papers were excluded based on their title/abstracts. Following initial screening, 129 references were removed. The most common reasons for removal included that papers (a) were not empirical or were purely theoretical in nature, (b) did not examine asexual identity development (e.g. presentation of purely demographic information), or (c) concerned members of other non-heterosexual communities without separate presentation of results pertaining to asexual participants. A second screening resulted in the removal of an additional 127 papers. These papers were removed as they did not investigate the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual identity development or internalisation. Through a second removal of duplicates, five more papers were removed, resulting in a total of 16 papers included for extraction and review.

1 May 2019–31 March 2020: An additional review of literature was conducted with the same search terms and databases as the original search. Forty papers were imported to EndNote, with the removal of three duplicates. Upon initial screening of titles and abstracts, 32 papers were removed as they were

not empirical in nature or did not examine the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual individuals. Following an additional screening, one more paper was removed for the reasons outlined above. This resulted in a total of four papers to be included in the data extraction process.

1 January 2000–1 July 2021: A final review of literature was carried out with the same databases as the original search. Search terms were expanded to include 'asexuality' or 'asexual' and 'identity development' or 'identity formation' or 'identity construction'. This yielded 356 papers. Following an initial screening, 328 papers were removed as they were either duplicated, did not meet inclusion criteria, or had already been reviewed in prior searches. The remaining 28 papers underwent content analysis carried out by authors MM and SK. Following content analysis, 17 papers were removed as 15 did not meet inclusion criteria and two were not available to the authors. This resulted in a total of 11 papers from this search to be included in the data extraction process.

Data extraction process

When combined, a total of 31 papers gathered from the database searches were included in the data extraction process. A data extraction spreadsheet was designed to gather all relevant information from the papers included for review. This detailed author names, location and year of publication, the method of investigation and analysis, study design and sample characteristics (sample size, age, gender, relationship status). The major themes produced within each study were listed within this extraction process (see Appendix A). All authors examined the documents and extracted information simultaneously. MM reviewed this process throughout. As this scoping review aims to garner information surrounding our current knowledge of asexual identity development and internalisation, the above categories were considered in a flexible manner. During the data extraction process, a further six papers were removed on the grounds that they did not explore the attitudes, values, experiences, or beliefs specific to the development of an asexual identity. This resulted in 25 empirical papers being included in this scoping review.

Search strategy: grey literature

Several databases and search engines were utilised during the grey literature search. Unlike the database search, a specific timeline was not identified. SK conducted several trials to determine search-engines that were most appropriate to retrieve and rank results that aligned with this scoping review. This resulted in the use of search engines dedicated to web-based resources such Google Search, DuckDuckGo and Dogpile. The first 100 results retrieved from each search-engine were considered for review. Dissertations and theses were searched using Ethos by British Library, dart Europe E-Thesis Portal, and repositories such as OpenGrey, Oaister/Worldcat, Core and Base. Conference proceedings were obtained through Web of Science and Research Gate. Search strategies remained consistent across resources and were derived from terms used in the bibliographic search. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of 'asexuality' or 'asexual', 'beliefs', 'attitudes', 'experiences', 'identity' and 'value'. There was a considerable overlap between resources and many results had already appeared in the bibliographic search. Dissertations, theses and conference proceedings were excluded from review if they did not concern components of asexual identity development and internalisation. Four articles were selected for data extraction.

Methodological quality

As this scoping review is exploratory in nature with an overarching aim to provide further information on asexual identity development and internalisation, an assessment of methodological quality was not performed. This allowed for the inclusion of all available literature in the area. Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews do not necessarily assess the quality of literature (Khalil et al., 2016).

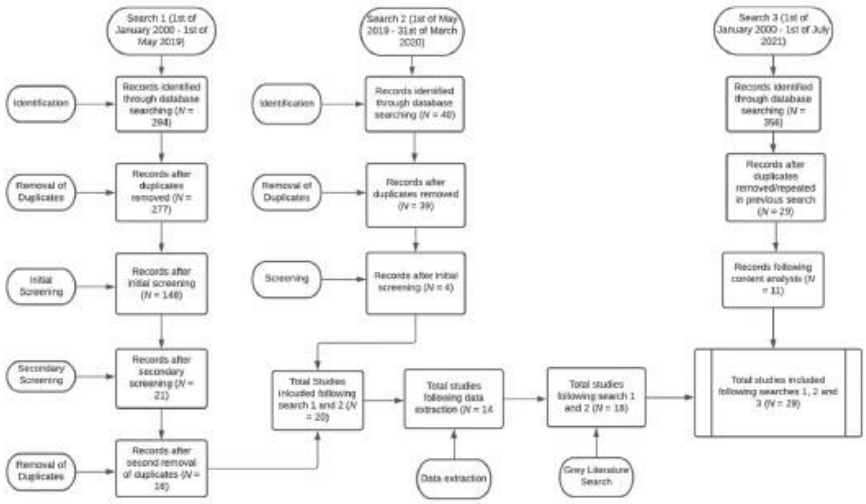


Figure 1. Flow diagram illustrating literature search and selection.

Analysing the data

Results were reviewed by authors SK and MM. The research team identified, coded and charted relevant units of text from the articles as outlined by (Tricco et al., 2016) with a focus on findings that pertained to elements of asexual identity development and/or internalisation.

Results

A total of twenty-nine articles were included for review. Key details from each article were charted and summarised to include author information, year of publication, sample information, study design and main findings (see Table A1). Although a variety of methodologies were utilised across studies, the majority were qualitative in design and analysis ($N = 23$), with some quantitative ($N = 3$) or mixed design ($N = 3$). Mixed-methods or quantitative studies performed mainly descriptive analyses of the attitudes and characteristics associated with an asexual population and charted demographic information. The method of analysis implemented across qualitative studies were mainly phenomenological, grounded theory and ethnographic. The most common rationale given for this choice of qualitative methodology was a desire to examine asexual individuals' personal perceptions of an event or experience. The prevalence of this choice of methodology coincides with the overarching aim of this scoping review which is also concerned with the accounts or sense-making processes of asexual individuals. Articles were produced predominantly within Western societies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. When identifying asexual participants within research, most studies ($N = 27$) used self-identification as an operational definition for asexuality. Several studies maintained the assumption that when recruiting through resources such as AVEN, participants should understand asexuality as 'a lack of sexual desire/attraction' and therefore, participants who self-identified as asexual were included in the research. One study used the 'Asexual Identification Scale' (AIS) when recruiting participants and another used a combination of self-identification as asexual and participant description of asexuality as 'not experiencing sexual attraction'. As most studies utilised self-identification as a definition for asexuality, a comparison of findings based on differing definitions for asexuality was not possible.

When analysed thematically, eight themes were generated to represent key findings across literature. These themes were identified as the following:

- Understanding Asexuality
- Coming to an Asexual Identity
- Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
- Isolation and Invisibility
- Disclosure
- Individual Differences
- Negotiating Relationships
- Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion

Understanding asexuality

Existing literature emphasises how asexuality is understood by asexuals and the implications that this may have when making sense of an asexual identity. Research suggests that asexuals understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often discovered through engagement with asexual communities and online forums.

Asexuality is understood predominantly within the asexual community as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Andersson, 2010; Brotto et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2008). An example of this can be seen in research conducted by Brotto et al. (2010), in which asexual participants described alternative motives for relationships and non-sexual forms of attraction. Similarly, Maxwell (2017) found that while asexuality may be connected to multiple forms of attraction, such attractions are based upon non-sexual desires, predominantly romantic with a focus on intellectual intimacy. Further examples of this can be seen within research conducted by Mitchell & Hunnicutt (2019) and Van Houdenhove et al. (2015), in which asexual participants note their ability to consider others as 'aesthetically pleasing' without sexual attraction.

Moreover, evidence suggests that sex and romance are perceived as two very separate constructs of desire within the asexual community. For example, attitudes towards romance do not differ significantly between asexual and allosexual participants. An example of this is seen within Bulmer & Izuma's (2018) comparison of asexual and allosexual participants' attitudes towards sex and romance. This research shows that while asexual participants typically display more negative attitudes towards sex, they do not differ significantly from allosexuals in terms of their implicit attitudes towards romance. Similarly, research suggests that asexual women are more open towards romance and romantic attraction without an element of sexual desire (Foster et al., 2019). This understanding of romantic and sexual desire as different is seen throughout the literature and appears key in forming participants' understanding of their asexual identities.

Finally, imperative to understanding one's asexuality is a sense of community gained when identifying as asexual. Research suggests that a sense of difference associated with discovering an asexual identity may be subdued by the concept of an asexual community or asexuality-specific support groups (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). For example, a shared sense of community and exposure to others' accounts of asexuality has been shown to allow participants to move beyond individualised self-questioning and assists in the understanding of their asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

Coming to an asexual identity

Much of the literature emphasises components of coming to an asexual identity, including an awareness of the self as different and feelings of otherness within a sexualised society. For example, feelings of disparity when comparing the self with peers, is a common experience among asexuals, and for many, marks the beginning of their asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019). Moreover, this sense of difference may result in feelings of otherness and self-questioning among asexuals (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and may initiate the process of discovering an asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011). However, research suggests that coming to an asexual identity may be a nuanced or 'fluid' process, that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). For example, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021) have been shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual. Moreover, within their proposed model of asexual identity development Robbins et al., (2016), acknowledge that awareness of one's asexual identity does not follow a linear progression and is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities.

The internet appears to play a large role when discovering and making sense of an asexual identity. For example, the internet and social media outlets act as a source of information among asexuals (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019) and have been shown to assist in the validation of an asexual experience as well as the coming out process (Robbins et al., 2016). Specifically, asexual participants have identified AVEN as a particularly useful source of information, both for their own validation, as well as a source of reference for friends and family members (Robbins et al., 2016).

Imperative to coming to an asexual identity is the ability to embrace one's sexuality and to adopt this as part of the self. Current literature conveys a sense of 'embracing' asexuality upon discovering its existence (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, literature suggests a sense of 'relief' when learning about asexuality and adopting an asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021).

Stigmatisation and the need to educate

Stigmatisation and the dismissal of asexuality is witnessed throughout literature. This stigmatisation appears to be a typical experience among participants and is considered by many to stem from the imposition of sexuality within society. These experiences of stigmatisation and a general lack of information surrounding asexuality brings forth a sense of obligation to educate others on asexuality.

Foster et al. (2019) reported the social rejection of participants' asexuality through allosexuals' assumptions that their lack of sexual interest is due to mental illness or childhood trauma. Such findings have been reproduced across literature, whereby asexuality lacks credibility within sexualised cultures (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016), and asexuals are often advised to seek medical or psychological explanations/treatments for their lack of sexual desire (Gupta, 2017). Participants have described others' consideration of asexuality as a 'phase' (Carrigan, 2011) 'mental or medical condition', or as a result of an abusive relationship (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). These experiences of stigmatisation appear to stem from a lack of information and the imposition of sexuality by society (Foster et al., 2019). Moreover, the presence of microaggressions and divergence from sexual and romantic expectations has brought many asexuals to experience 'shame' surrounding their lack of sexual attraction (Deutsch, 2018; Vares, 2021, p. 7) and a sense of the self as different or incomplete (Savage, 2019). For example, many asexual participants have been shown to adopt a negative understanding of asexuality and attribute their lack of sexual attraction to conditions such as Asperger's Syndrome and problematic childhood experiences (Andersson, 2010). Again, these findings are considered to evolve as

a negative result of 'compulsory sexuality' in which being sexual, irrespective of sexual identity, is favoured over 'non-sexualness' or asexuality (Gupta, 2015). According to the reviewed literature, the sources of this stigma may include family, friends, religious institutions and medical professionals, some members of non-heterosexual communities and the sexualisation of media and advertising (Deutsch, 2018; Gupta, 2017; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019).

Research suggests that experiences of stigmatisation have led to a 'strong desire among asexuals' to educate others on the existence of asexuality (Brotto et al., 2010). This sense of obligation to inform others about asexuality stems from a need to destigmatise and address misconceptions (Brotto et al., 2010; Savage, 2019), increase visibility (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017) and legitimise asexuality (Scherrer, 2008). Findings from Gupta (2017), indicate a motivation for political/social change stemming predominantly from experiences of marginalisation and subsequent engagement in outreach activities and visibility work. This was also seen within research conducted by Mollet (2020, 2021), in which many asexuals considered their roles in volunteer efforts and educational initiatives as a responsibility and felt compelled to enhance information surrounding asexuality. Moreover, many asexuals express the need for increased research surrounding asexuality, to enhance self-identification and legitimate sources of information (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate a common experience of stigmatisation that is resisted through a shared obligation to educate others and promote an awareness of asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity.

Isolation and invisibility

Current literature suggests a common experience of invisibility and social isolation among asexual individuals. This invisibility of asexuality appears to stem predominantly from sexualised cultures and allonormativity. For example, Vares (2021, p. 7), reported that representations of the heteronormative ideal, such as 'the happy family' are considered 'inescapable' by some asexual participants, with limited offline contact and few groups available for support. Such findings appear consistent across literature, with many participants reporting a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of asexuality (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018). This consideration of asexuality as invisible appears as a source of 'angst' for some individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518), making it harder for them to come out (Dawson et al., 2016). Moreover, allonormativity has been shown to influence asexual individuals' identity management in multiple ways and contributes towards invisibility, invalidity, and the erasure of asexuals (Mollet, 2021). When examining the role of allonormativity within higher education, Mollet (2020, 2021), found that many asexual participants internalised allonormative ideals and questioned their asexuality. This sense of doubt surrounding participants' asexual identities was reinforced by lack of exposure to asexuality and perpetuated a sense of isolation (Mollet, 2020). Moreover, this sense of isolation and invisibility is reinforced by the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication of sexual relationships as 'normal' (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). Interestingly, while participants attributed this social anonymity to a lack of awareness of asexuality, some also considered this as a result of disguising their asexuality (Mollet, 2020, 2021) or the ability to 'fake being sexual' (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518).

Disclosure

According to current literature, there are several factors influencing an individual's willingness to disclose their asexual identity. Such factors range from a desire to increase awareness of asexuality, to apprehension surrounding a fear of dismissal and alienation. Moreover, research suggests that reactions towards participants' disclosure is related to others' awareness of asexuality.

Findings from Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) reveal that while selective in the disclosure of their asexual identities, participants felt that coming-out was necessary to increase awareness of asexuality. Research suggests that many asexual individuals consider disclosure as 'necessary' to increase visibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019, p. 132; Robbins et al., 2016), and for some, is an opportunity to no longer hide their lack of sexual attraction (Rossi, 2017). Despite this, evidence suggests that coming out is a selective process within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016), with many asexuals considering disclosure as 'unnecessary irrespective of circumstances' (Mollet, 2021). For example, Robbins et al. (2016) found that some asexual participants engaged in an internal process of identity acceptance and felt that coming out was not salient to their identities. Moreover, they noted that many participants considered disclosure as relevant only within romantic relationships or when addressing questions surrounding dating and finding a partner (Robbins et al., 2016).

Research suggests that many asexuals fear disclosure due to invisibility and denial within sexualised cultures (Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). This apprehensiveness surrounding disclosure reportedly stems from a fear of stigmatisation (Robbins et al., 2016) and invisibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). For example, dismissal, expected or experienced, from friends, family and potential partners (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2018), as well as others' assumption of sexual pathology, has been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). According to Mollet (2020), this denial or 'erasure' of asexuality perpetuates invisibility and contributes towards asexual individuals' beliefs that others are unwilling to accept or recognise their asexual identities. Moreover, many asexual participants have recalled experiences of erasure when disclosing their asexual identities to members of non-heterosexual communities and associated organisations (Mollet, 2020, 2021; Savage, 2019). Again, this dismissal appears to stem from allonormativity and negative assumptions held by some members of non-heterosexual communities and has caused many asexual individuals to refrain from sharing their identities within these spaces (Mollet, 2021).

Despite these concerns surrounding disclosure, support and acceptance from others is also seen throughout the reviewed literature. Findings from Robbins et al. (2016) indicated positive reactions towards disclosure that were related to an increased understanding and awareness of asexuality. Moreover, despite the existence of fear surrounding disclosure, Rothblum et al. (2020) reported an availability of social support that did not differ significantly from the experiences of other sexual minorities. Such experiences of support and understanding are also seen in research conducted by Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019), in which some participants report acceptance and understanding when coming out to family and friends.

Individual differences

While the asexual community holds many commonalities, research suggests that there are a diverse range of attitudes and sub-identities that act to distinguish asexual individuals. This can be seen through the presence of both romantic and aromantic identities, varying attitudes towards sex and relationships, and differing sentiments regarding the significance of asexuality to one's self-concept. An example of such diversity can be seen within research conducted by Carrigan (2011) and Rossi (2017), in which participants presented varying attitudes towards sex, such as 'sex positive', 'sex-neutral', 'sex-averse' and 'anti-sex'. Additionally, research indicates the presence of 'demi-sexuals', whereby participants experience sexual attraction based on romantic desire (Carrigan, 2011), or intermittent sexual attraction while still identifying as asexual (Foster et al., 2019).

Romantic and aromantic identities are also shown to exist within the asexual community (Bulmer & Izuma, 2018; Scherrer, 2008). Distinctions between the two typically appear when describing an 'ideal relationship', with aromantic asexuals often considering this as 'friendship like' and romantic asexuals describing some level of physical intimacy and a preference for monogamy (Carrigan, 2011;

Scherrer, 2008, p. 623). Moreover, when investigating sexual attraction and behaviour among asexual individuals, McInroy et al. (2020) found that over half of self-identified asexual participants ($N = 711$) had experienced some form of sexual and/or romantic attraction. This corresponds with the concept that asexuality is diverse, with varying levels of attraction and differing experiences of sexual and romantic relationships. The presence of diverse sexual and romantic identities has previously been interpreted through the 'split attraction model' (SAM), whereby sexual and romantic attraction are considered separate constructs that can occur independently of one another (Przybyło, 2022). This model, which encompasses additional forms of attraction such as aesthetic, sensual, platonic, emotional and intellectual attraction, has been considered useful when understanding the nuances that underlie asexual and (a)romantic identities (Carroll, 2020; Przybyło, 2022; Winer et al., 2022). Despite this, the SAM has recently received conjecture from some individuals within the asexual community, as many feel it conflates attraction and orientation models (Coyote., 2019a, 2019b). As such, it may be more appropriate to consider this model as a guide to understanding the distinctions that underly asexual identities and position it within broader terms such as 'differentiated attraction/orientation' (Sennkestra., 2020). This may remove the assumption that the SAM is a single coherent model that is unvarying across asexual communities and may grant greater flexibility and versatility in asexual individuals' use of labels when referring to their romantic and sexual identities.

The literature also indicates that asexual individuals differ in their experience of being asexual and the value that they place on their asexual identity. An example of this can be seen within research conducted by Dawson et al. (2016), where many participants described the coming out process as important, while others considered it socially unnecessary with no pragmatic purpose. Moreover, several participants recounted a 'Eureka' moment when first discovering the term asexual, while others considered this euphoria as short lived and quickly moved on following discovery (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 16).

Negotiating relationships

Existing research emphasises how asexual individuals negotiate and understand intimate relationships. This includes the negotiation of intimate boundaries, loyalties and partnerships; the motivations to engage in a relationship; and doubts surrounding the feasibility of an intimate relationship with an allosexual partner.

The process of negotiating sexual boundaries and the resulting arrangements held between asexuals and allosexual partners is documented across literature. This can be seen through asexual participants' willingness to engage in some form of sexual activity with an allosexual partner (Gupta, 2017; Haefner, 2011; Jolene Sloan, 2015), and consideration of sex as a compromise within relationships (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020). Interestingly, research suggests that BDSM communities allow some asexuals the opportunity to find partners and engage in intimate activities that do not rely on sexual desire (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018; Winter-Gray & Hayfield, 2021). Moreover, many asexuals report engaging in open relationships to maintain partnerships with allosexuals (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), and consider infidelity as romantic rather than sexual engagement with others (Brotto et al., 2010). Despite this, research also suggests that some asexuals engage in consensual sex due to societal pressures (Gupta, 2017), feel unable to communicate their asexuality or come to an agreement with their partners (Dawson et al., 2019; Savage, 2019).

Asexual participants describe several motivations for engaging in relationships with both asexual and allosexual partners. These motivations appear to stem from a desire to gain intellectual intimacy (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), achieve long-term monogamy and a traditional family structure (Vares, 2018, 2021), and for some, adhere to cultural expectations and gender role expressions (Foster et al., 2019). However, research also suggests a sense of doubt surrounding the perceived possibility of a relationship. For example, many asexuals question the practicality of a sexless relationship (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and describe an inactive approach to finding a partner due to these perceived difficulties (Maxwell, 2017; Vares, 2018, 2021). Moreover, many

asexuals consider their chances of finding a partner as 'low' and often dismiss non-sexual closeness in friendships due to a fear of 'something more' (Dawson et al., 2019, pp. 11–14). Interestingly, some asexuals considered a relationship with another asexual individual as unlikely due to a lack of accessibility (Vares, 2018).

Conservative sexual beliefs and religion

The evidence that surrounds asexual participants' religious beliefs and conservative views is sparse and conflicting at times. Such discrepancies can be seen through varying reports of religiosity, as well as differing levels of conservative sexual beliefs across studies. For example, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) suggest that many asexuals use Catholic discourse to explain their asexuality, Brotto et al. (2010) and Rothblum et al. (2019), found a higher proportion of atheism within their samples. Moreover, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) found Catholicism to be significant point of reference among asexuals, Brotto et al. (2010), found that asexuality was more often related to non-conformist ideals, as well as an objection to religious values. In addition to this, Carvalho et al. (2017), reported the presence of more sexually conservative beliefs among asexuals, although this is yet to be addressed within future research.

Discussion

This scoping review presents several important findings about the attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences that underpin asexual identity development, as well as the process of internalising societal messages held towards asexuality. An analysis of the available literature has generated a list of provisory themes that describe components of asexual identity development and provides a unique contribution to our current knowledge of asexuality. The themes identified within this review appear consistently throughout literature highlighting their relevance and importance when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Moreover, features of identity development presented within this research correspond with existing theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development. It must be noted that the themes presented within this research are not prescriptive of asexual identity development and do not account for the varied experiences, sub-identities or genders present within the asexual population.

Theoretical implications and suggestions for future research

The articles included in this review were mainly qualitative in design and produced largely descriptive accounts of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs that may shape asexual identity development and internalisation. The reoccurring use of qualitative methods within the reviewed literature corresponds with an overarching aim to gain insights into the thoughts and feelings of participants (Austin & Sutton, 2014), as well as current attempts to broaden our understanding of asexual identities and experiences associated with asexuality (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Moreover, summarising the available qualitative research grants an additional layer to the value of this scoping review and may be used to inform the design and implementation of future quantitative enquiries.

Existing literature emphasises the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their lack of sexual attraction. Evidence suggests that asexual individuals typically understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often recognise their asexuality through exposure to asexual communities. Identification as asexual appears to follow a common trajectory that is initiated through self-questioning and confirmed through online supports such as AVEN. Moreover, these findings are indicative of the term asexuality as hidden and not commonly recognised prior to exposure to online resources. The literature also presents a common experience of stigmatisation and social dismissal of one's sexual identity. This

fear of dismissal and a lack of awareness from others appears to impact participants' willingness to disclose their asexual identities and reinforces a desire to educate others and increase awareness of asexuality. Finally, the literature suggests alternative motivations to engage in romantic relationships, as well as asexual individuals' concerns that underly intimacy and loyalties within partnerships. Despite such commonalities, research also presents a diverse range of attitudes and identities present within the asexual community. This is witnessed through the existence of diverse romantic (e.g. aromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic and homoromantic) and sexual (e.g. asexual, demisexual and grey-asexual) identities, as well as varying levels of significance placed on one's asexual identity. Moreover, there was a diverse range of ages and genders (e.g. male, female, transgender, agender and genderqueer) reported within the reviewed literature.

The role of heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality

Heteronormativity and 'compulsory sexuality' appeared as key concepts underpinning the research area of asexuality and specifically, literature surrounding the experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values of asexual individuals. Heteronormativity can be considered to relate to the promotion of heterosexuality as a societally preferred sexual identity, whereas compulsory sexuality pertains to 'the common assumption that everyone is defined by some type of sexual attraction' (Emens, 2014, p. 303). Although the influence of these concepts was seen predominantly within literature investigating asexual individuals' experiences of stigmatisation, isolation and invisibility, they were evident throughout all themes listed within this scoping review. Moreover, there appeared to be consistent evidence for allosexuals' negative sentiments held towards asexuality and the impact that this has on asexual individuals' identity development and internalisation.

Throughout the reviewed literature, there was repeated reference to allosexuals' dismissal of asexuality as some form of physical or psychological disorder. This is consistent with the values of heteronormativity (Robertson, 2014) and allonormativity and thus, may lead to more a distressing sexual questioning process (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020). The influence of these heteronormative and allonormative ideals was apparent within literature through feelings of stigmatisation and alienation and appeared to instil a negative understanding of asexuality among some asexual participants. Isolation and 'erasure' also appeared as recurring sentiments throughout literature, as asexual individuals reported a sense of difference from their peers (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). Moreover, a common experience of invisibility reported within the literature corresponds with the pressures of compulsory sexuality and how this may hinder the recognition of an asexual identity among asexual individuals (Winer et al., 2022). It was apparent that many participants internalised this sense of difference surrounding their asexuality and as a result, were seen to doubt or question their asexual identities. This is reminiscent of past literature surrounding the influence of heteronormativity and how this may exclude and marginalise non-heterosexual individuals (Rich, 1980). Moreover, these findings may be likened to research surrounding other sexual minority identities in which isolation and a sense of difference may lead to a greater risk for psychological damage (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). Future research should consider the impact that stigmatisation, isolation and dismissal may have on asexual individuals' wellbeing, granting greater insight into the problems that they may face when coming to an asexual identity. It is apparent that the imposition of sexual norms within society may negatively impact asexual individuals' cohesive sense of identity (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015) and thus, further investigation is required to better understand asexual individuals' experiences of overcoming both heteronormative and allonormative ideals (Winer et al., 2022). While there is much evidence surrounding asexuals' experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation, the impact of minority stress and the influence that this may have on their well-being is yet to be comprehensively investigated. According to Friedman (1999), stigmatisation and prejudice directed at a minority group can result in a stressful environment that may lead to physical and/or mental health problems. Interestingly, this minority stress can be linked to concealment of sexual identity (Meyer, 2003) and has been shown to have far-reaching health

implications for lesbian and gay people (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). As this scoping review has identified reports of stigmatisation within the asexual population, future research should consider how this is internalised by asexuals and the implications that this may have on their wellbeing. This may grant insight into the challenges faced by asexuals, as well as the resources available to counter stigmatisation and prejudice.

Asexual Identity Development

The themes present within this scoping review relate closely to stages of non-heterosexual identity development (Cass, 1979) and elements specific to asexual identity development (Robbins et al., 2016). Throughout literature, there is consistent evidence of how asexual individuals come to discover, understand and identify with asexuality, as well as the processes surrounding the disclosure of their asexual identity. Cass's (1979) initial stages of 'Identity Confusion' and 'Identity Comparison' are evident within the literature as a consideration of the self as different from peers marks the beginning of an individual's asexual identity. Moreover, repeated reports of self-questioning, pathologising and subsequent searching is consistent with the components unique to asexual identity development. The third and fourth stages of Cass's model, 'Identity Acceptance' and 'Identity Pride', are seen within the literature through varying reports of asexual individuals' embracing their asexuality and gaining a sense of asexual community. Specifically, online resources and asexual communities are shown to assist in the development of an asexual identity and correspond with current understanding of asexual identity development. According to Harper et al. (2016), online communities assist in developing non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe space of recognition and self-acceptance. As seen throughout the reviewed literature, these online spaces allow asexual individuals to develop their sense of identity within a larger community. Moreover, the asexual community acts to ameliorate feelings of marginalisation and isolation deriving from heteronormativity and allonormativity, which as a result fosters a positive self-concept and identity among asexual individuals. Finally, disclosure of an asexual identity and a need to educate others on asexuality appears repeatedly throughout literature, further highlighting its applicability within the development of an asexual identity.

Despite the relevance of themes presented within this scoping review to the stages identified within non-heterosexual identity development models, there are several instances which portray asexual identity development as a non-linear process. For example, much of the literature suggests that developing and maintaining an asexual identity may be a nuanced or fluid process that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016). This is seen within the literature as visibility, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies are shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021). As a result, findings from this scoping review confirm a growing awareness of the multifaceted nature of asexual identity development (Winer et al., 2022).

Further research is required to establish the process of asexual identity development, as well as the factors contributing to how asexual individuals internalise their lack of sexual attraction. This may include investigation into the multifaceted nature of asexual identities and how they interact to shape asexual identity development. Moreover, future research should consider how asexual identity development coincides with and differs from that of other sexual minority identities. This will provide greater insight into the unique attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences that contribute towards asexual identity development. Finally, as many asexual individuals report discoveries through online forums, future research should investigate the influence of online support and its role in amending this sense of difference.

Relationships and theories of love

When considering asexual individuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, much of the literature indicates a desire to gain intellectual or emotional intimacy without sexual desire (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021). These findings may be interpreted through Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, whereby love comprises of three independent components namely, 'intimacy', 'passion' and 'decision/commitment'. According to Sternberg (1986, 1997), these components are motivational needs that are present in varying degrees within relationships and can combine to form varying 'love styles'. Of relevance are the parts intimacy' and 'commitment' in which Sternberg (1986) theorised that an individual can experience closeness, connectedness and 'bondedness' towards a partner without the presence of 'passion' or what is interpreted as sexual desire. This notion that intimate emotions can be felt without sexual desire, may tie in with asexuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, while also providing a useful framework for better understanding their experiences within these relationships. As such, the findings present within this review may act as an argument for the Sternberg model in that different forms of love are possible such as commitment and intimacy without the presence of sexual desire.

Moreover, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity also appear as factors contributing to asexual individuals' desire to engage in a partner relationship. Although asexuals' experience of sex is investigated within the current literature, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity is yet to be expanded upon. While this review does identify the influence of societal pressures (Gupta, 2017) and a desire to maintain relationships (Foster et al., 2019), there is a need to further investigate asexuals' reasons for having sex and the implications that this may have on their understanding of their asexual identity. Thus, future research should examine the presence of these emotion-based incentives and how they may align with Sternberg's model of love.

The asexual community as heterogeneous

Studies typically reported a diverse range of ages, romantic orientations and genders within their participant pools. This reinforces an awareness of the asexual community as heterogeneous (Brotto & Yule, 2017), and corresponds with previous findings surrounding its widespread diversity (Weis et al., 2017). Moreover, this demonstrates the diverse nature of asexual identity development and how the integration of gender and sexuality within a heteronormative society may account for variability within asexual individuals' experiences (Cuthbert, 2019). This is seen within the reviewed literature as participants' departure from societally expected gender roles and sexual norms threatened their positive self-perceptions and subsequent identity development (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Moreover, gender appears to play a fundamental role within asexual individuals' experiences of dating and relationships, as well as allosexuals' reactions towards the disclosure of their asexual identities. For example, female asexuals' lack of sexual attraction may be dismissed as sexual passivity (Vares, 2018) with some allosexuals considering them to 'tease' or 'lead on' their partners (Haefner, 2011). Conversely, sexual desire is considered inherent to male participants' gender identity, with some allosexuals disbelieving their lack of sexual drive and questioning their masculinity (Vares, 2018). Thus, the employment of heteronormative feminine and masculine sexuality, as well as allonormativity, may contribute towards the denial of asexual individuals' lack of sexual attraction in ways that are specific to their preferred gender identity.

Considering the diverse nature of the asexual community, future research should examine the influence of varying sub-identities on asexual identity development. This may include the intersection of queer identities (e.g. transgender and gender non-conforming people) and asexuality, as well as the role of racism, sexism and ableism within asexual identity development (Foster et al., 2019). This may allow greater inclusivity within research and grant insight into the complexity of asexual participants' experiences (Antonsen et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019).

Limitations

The generalisability of themes produced within this review is limited due to the nature of the participant pools involved. As most studies gained participants through online communities and asexuality specific platforms, this may not represent the experiences of asexuals who are not exposed to online forums. Thus, this brings forth the need to investigate the identity development and internalisation of asexual individuals that are not recruited through asexuality specific platforms or communities.

Moreover, there were several limitations surrounding the methodology of this scoping review. Firstly, the search strategy excluded studies published in a language other than English, leaving open the possibility of important national and/or cultural differences. Secondly, as scoping reviews do not require a quality assessment of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), our reporting of these results may be subjective in nature. Finally, as our understanding of asexuality and the language used to describe asexual identities continues to evolve, the search terms used within this study may have led to the exclusion of some published literature. This is particularly relevant to research published earlier within the area of asexuality.

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Notes on contributors

Sinéad Kelleher is a PhD candidate and Head Tutor of the BA (Hons) Applied Psychology programme and BA (Hons) Psychology and Computing programme in University College Cork, Ireland. Her research interests include human sexuality, developmental psychology, social psychology, and psychometrics.

Mike Murphy is a Lecturer in Applied Psychology, and Research Coordinator of the Doctoral Programme in Clinical Psychology, in University College Cork, Ireland. His research interests include human sexuality, social support, and positive & coaching psychology.

Xin Su is a recent graduate in Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Ireland. His research interests include health and wellbeing in the context of social identity.

ORCID

Mike Murphy http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8379-3813

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Appendix A

Table A1. Charted articles included in the scoping review.

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
1	Andersson (2010) Country = Sweden	Age: not specified Gender: Female (N = 5), Male (N = 1) Sample Size = 6	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Combined Analysis of Content Analysis, Interviews and Observations Collection: Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
2	Brotto et al. (2010) Country = Canada	Age: Range = 20–57 Gender: Male (N = 4), Female (N = 11) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships
3	Bulmer and Izuma (2018) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Female (M = 21.11), Male (M = 21.82) Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (N = 14), Male (N = 3), Other (N = 1) Gender (Control): Female (N = 23), Male (N = 4) Sample Size = 45 (18 Asexuals, 27 Controls)	Study Design: Between Group Comparison Method of Analysis: Quantitative Collection: Online questionnaire and paper questionnaire	Understanding Asexuality Individual Differences
4	Carrigan (2011) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = Interviews (N = 8) online questionnaires (N = 130)	Study Design: Qualitative & Quantitative Design Method of Analysis: Mixed Method Collection: Interviews & Online Questionnaire	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences
5	Carvalho et al. (2017) Country = Portugal	Age (Asexual Participants): Female (M = 22.7, SD = 4.8), Male (M = 22.4, SD = 4.1) Age (Control Participants): Female (M = 22.5, SD = 2.9), Male (M = 22.4, SD = 2.7) Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (N = 68), Male (N = 19) Gender (Control): Female (N = 58), Male (N = 19) Sample Size = 164 (91 Asexuals, 81 Controls)	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) Collection: Online Questionnaires	Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion
6	Dawson et al. (2019) Country = Scotland	Age: 76% < 29 years of age, 24% ≥ 30 years of age. Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 50	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Symbolic Interactionist Theory Collection: Diary Writing and Interview Accounts	Negotiating Relationships
7	Deutsch (2018) Country = United States	Age: (M = 22.27, SD = 2.24) Gender: Female (N = 11) Sample Size = 11	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Analysis Collection: Semi-structured Interview	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate

(*Continued*)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
8	Foster et al. (2019) Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–51 (M = 25.9, Median = 22.5, SD = 10.14) Gender: Female (N = 5), Bio-female (N = 1), Cis-female (N = 2), Cis-woman (N = 1), 'Asexual' (N = 1) Sample Size = 11	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Research Collection: Semi-structured Interviews	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Individual Differences
9	Gupta (2017) Country = United States	Age: Range = 19–50 (M = 29, SD = 9.5) Gender: Female (70%), Male (23%), Trans woman (N = 1), Other (1) Sample Size = 30	Study Design: Qualitative Research Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: In-depth semi structured interview (in-person and over phone)	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences Isolation and Invisibility
10	Haefner Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–55, 18–21 (N = 29); 22–25 (N = 19); 26–30 (N = 8); 31–35 (N = 4); 36; 40 (N = 0); 41–45 (N = 1); 46–50 (N = 1); 51–55 (N = 1) *One participant did not give their age Gender: F (N = 37), M (N = 12), Agender (N = 9), Gender Queer (N = 8), Other (N = 6), Pangender (N = 1), Transgender (N = 1) Sample Size = 64	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory Collection: Two online surveys	Negotiating Relationships
11	Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) Country = Poland	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size: Not Specified	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Not Specified Collection: Analysis of Online Forums (Sieć Edukacji Aseksualnej or SEA – translated as the Asexual Education Network)	Conservative Sexual Belief and Religion
12	MacNeela and Murphy (2015) Country = Ireland	Age: Range = 18–58 (M = 26.10, SD = 9.96) Gender: Female (31), Male (15), Other (18) unspecified (2) Sample Size = 66	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Online Questionnaires	Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility
13	Maxwell (2017) Country = United Kingdom	Age: < 30 (N = 22), ≤ 35 (N = 4), >35 (N = 3) Gender: Female (N = 22), Male (N = 7), Agender (N = 2), Non-gender (N = 5), Demi-female (N = 2), Cisgender (N = 12), Androgynous (N = 1) Sample Size (completed surveys) = 68 Sample Size (completed survey and interview) = 29	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Online Surveys and Online Interviews.	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Negotiating Relationships
14	McInroy et al. (2020) Country = United States of America & Canada	Age: Range = 14–24, Mean = 17.43 Gender: Non-binary (N = 306), Female (N = 214), Genderqueer (N = 169), Trans Man (N = 127), Male (N = 42), Trans Woman (N = 12), Two Spirit (N = 11), Other (N = 9) Sample Size: 711	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Quantitative Analysis, demographic analysis Collection: Online Survey	Coming to an Asexual Identity Disclosure Individual Differences

(*Continued*)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
15	Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) Country = United States	Age: Not Specified Gender: Female (N = 6), Male (N = 2), M-questioning (N = 1), Agender (N = 1) Sample Size = 10	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative – not specified Collection: Modified life story narrative approach with an open-ended interview process	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
16	Mollet (2020) Country = United States of America	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender, Agender (N = 1); Cisgender Woman (N = 4); Agender, Transgender (N = 1); Agender, Transmasculine (N = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (N = 1); Nonbinary (N = 2); Cisgender Man (N = 2) Sample Size = 12	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
17	Mollet (2021) Country = United States of America	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender, Agender (N = 1); Cisgender Woman (N = 4); Agender, Transgender (N = 1); Agender, Transmasculine (N = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (N = 1); Nonbinary (N = 2); Cisgender Man (N = 2) Sample Size = 12	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded theory Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure
18	Robbins et al. (2016) Country: United States	Age: Range = 18–25 (71%), 26–32 (20%), 33 and over (8%) Gender: Female (69%), Male (16%), Unidentified (15%) Sample Size = 169	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
19	Rossi (2017) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 20–45 Gender: Female (N = 8) Sample Size = 8	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: Interviews (skype, facetime and in-person)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences Disclosure

(*Continued*)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
20	Rothblum et al. (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18–53 (M = 30, SD = 11.5) Gender: Non-binary (N = 3), Male (N = 3) Female (N = 21) Sample Size = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion
21	Rothblum et al. (2020) Country: United States	Age: Range = 18–61 91.19% (18–27) Gender: Female (27.74%), Male (0%), Gender-queer, non-binary (72.26%) Sample Size = 19	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: bivariate differences assessed between asexual and non-asexual sexual minorities Collection: Online Questionnaire	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
22	Savage (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18–28 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 5	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis (guided by Muted Group Theory and the Minority Stress Model) Collection: Semi-structured Interviews (in-person and online)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
23	Scherrer (2008) Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–66 (M = 27.4, Median = 21) Gender: Female (N = 75), Male (N = 18), Transgender (N = 2), "not easily categorised" (N = 7) Sample Size = 102	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Ethnography Collection: Online survey	Understanding the Asexual Self Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences
24	Dawson et al. (2016) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = Majority 18–29, otherwise not specified Gender: Not specified Sample Size (Biographical Interview) = 50 Sample Size (two-week diaries) = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematically analysed using software program NVivo10 Collection: Biographical interview; two-week diaries	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
25	Jolene Sloan (2015) Country = United States	Age: Range = 19–34 Gender: Female (N = 10), Male (N = 2), Transgender Woman (N = 2), Transgender Man (N = 1) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative, not specified Collection: Interviews (in-person or via online messaging)	Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
26	Van Houdenhove et al., (2015) Country = Belgium	Age: Range = 20–50 20-30 (N = 4), 31–40 (N = 3), 41–50 (N = 2) Gender: Female (N = 9)Sample Size = 9	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Semi-structured interviews	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Negotiating Relationships
27	Vares (2018) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18–60Gender: Male and Female Participants (not specified) Sample Size = 13	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Discourse Analysis Collection: Interviews (in-person and over phone)	Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility

(*Continued*)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
28	Vares (2021) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18–60 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Negotiating Relationships Stigmatisation and the need to Educate
29	Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2021) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = 18–35 (M = 22) Gender: Female (N = 33), Transwomen (N = 2), Male (N = 5), Transman (N = 3), Agender (N = 3), Gender-fluid (N = 2) Sample Size = 48	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Online Survey	Negotiating Relationships

Appendix VI – The Identity Development and Internalization of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis



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Sinéad Kelleher & Mike Murphy

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The identity development and internalization of asexual orientation in women: an interpretative phenomenological analysis

Sinéad Kelleher and Mike Murphy

School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the identity development and internalization of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. Participants were recruited through the online community the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and included five women between the ages of 18 and 40. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Five themes emerged from the data: The Asexual Self, Discovering Asexuality, Disclosure, Navigating Relationships and Barriers to Accepting Asexuality. The development of an asexual identity was initiated through an awareness of the self as different within society and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community. Although all participants described a sense of pride surrounding their asexual identity, some participants at times attempted to minimize the importance of asexuality to their self-concepts. Social norms and the values of a heteronormative society influenced participants' abilities to accept their orientation, as well as their coming-out processes. There were notable discrepancies between participants' accounts that were specific to their romantic orientation and age. The theoretical implications of each theme within the development of an asexual identity and internalization of an asexual orientation are discussed.

LAY SUMMARY

This research outlines the process of developing an asexual identity including an awareness of the self as different, active searching, finding a community and coming-out. These findings inform our understanding of how asexual individuals develop a positive sense of self and come to accept their lack of sexual desire.

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Asexuality; identity development; internalization; interpretative phenomenological analysis; heteronormativity

Introduction

Research surrounding asexuality has increased considerably over the past several decades and is growing in profile (Catri, 2021; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). This may be due to the enhanced visibility of the orientation

CONTACT Sinéad Kelleher sinead.kelleher@ucc.ie School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.

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and community cohesion, as well as the need for research surrounding the experiences and issues of asexual individuals (Hammack et al., 2019). While there is currently no definitive conceptualization of asexuality within the literature, it is defined predominantly as either a unique sexual orientation or as a sexual identity (Catri, 2021). When considering asexuality as a sexual orientation, a proportion of the literature has attempted to define asexuality as an "enduring" lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364). This definition derives from both theoretical and empirical research surrounding the orientation and develops upon Storms' (1980) two-dimensional model of sexuality, in which asexuality encompasses individuals who score low on both heteroeroticism and homoeroticism. Moreover, this understanding of an asexual person as one who "does not experience sexual attraction" corresponds with the definition used by many members of the Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest online community for asexual individuals (Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network, 2018).

Definitional issues surrounding asexuality

An understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others does not necessarily imply, therefore, a lack of sexual experience or of romantic attraction amongst asexuals (Bogaert, 2015). For example, research has shown that many asexual individuals are sexually active (Aicken et al., 2013; Brotto et al., 2010) and can hold varying attitudes towards sex such as sex-positive, sex-neutral, and sex-averse (Carrigan, 2011). Moreover, reduced sexual behavior, or a state of chastity may not be understood as a hallmark of asexuality, as individuals abstaining from sexual activity may not lack sexual desire nor understand the self as asexual (Bogaert, 2015). As mentioned previously, a lack of sexual desire does not necessarily constitute a lack of romantic attraction or affection directed towards others, with many asexual individuals identifying as heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic and so on (Bogaert, 2004; Hinderliter, 2009). To elaborate, sexual and romantic attraction are often recognized as separate, with romantic attraction deriving from feelings of "infatuation" and "emotional attachment" (Diamond, 2003, p. 174) and sexual attraction involving "a wish, need, or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities" (Regan & Berscheid, 1995, p. 346). Moreover, it is common within the asexual community to distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction on the basis of gender (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Scherrer, 2008). For example, some asexuals may report a capacity for romantic attraction irrespective of gender (i.e. biromantic) but experience some level of sexual attraction towards a specific gender (i.e. the opposite gender).

Using a definition that centers upon a lack of sexual desire directed towards other people does not mean that an asexual individual inherently lacks sexual desire. On the contrary, much literature indicates the presence of sexual desire or a capacity for arousal amongst asexual individuals, although "solitary" in nature and not directed towards others (Bogaert, 2012, 2015, p. 364). Within the broader context of the asexual population, some individuals may experience varying levels of sexual attraction (i.e. graysexual) or develop sexual attraction towards another individual upon

the presence of romantic attraction (i.e. demi-sexual) (Hammack et al., 2019). Thus, asexuality is believed to exist along a spectrum, with some individuals reporting fluctuating levels of sexual attraction and varying experiences surrounding sexual activity and romantic relationships (Hammack et al., 2019).

Conversely, a lack of sexual attraction does not necessarily imply that an individual identifies as asexual. While self-identification with a sexual orientation is considered "important from both developmental and sociocultural perspectives" (Bogaert, 2015, p. 364), there are many issues when defining an orientation purely in this way. This includes an inconsistent awareness of self-labels, hesitation towards coming out, fluctuating allegiances to a label, as well as political motivations (Bogaert, 2012). Thus, defining sexual orientation through self-identification or labels alone may impede the complex and multidimensional identity formation apparent amongst many sexual minority individuals (Diamond, 2003).

In the context of the current research, asexuality has been operationalized as when an individual identifies as asexual and describes experiencing no sexual attraction (Catri, 2021). Moreover, to remain sensitive to the complexities and nuances surrounding identification with an asexual orientation, participants were asked to describe what the term "asexuality" *meant* to them. This granted an unbiased depiction of each participant's understanding of their asexuality and allowed an openness towards varying sexual behaviors, desires, labels and romantic attraction.

Asexual identity development

Identity can be understood as a "personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles" (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987; Morgan, 2013, p. 53) and may comprise of both individual and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). According to Savin-Williams (2011), sexual identity can be considered as both a cognitive and emotional understanding surrounding the significance of an individual's sexuality and may include sexual attraction, desire, behavior, values and relationships. Research is becoming increasingly interested in non-heterosexual individuals' understanding of their sexual orientation and the processes surrounding sexual identity development (Morgan, 2013).

Although the terms "sexual orientation" and "sexual identity" are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished; sexual orientation may account for an individual's sexual predisposition, whereas sexual identity is referred to as an individual's recognition of their sexual orientation and "identification with such predispositions" (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Worthington et al., 2002, p. 497). Essentially, an individual's sexual identity may comprise of the label that they use to identify their sexual orientation both to themselves and to others, and is representative of their "sexual thoughts, behaviours, attractions and fantasies" (Gordon & Silva, 2015). Moreover, it is important to note that sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the label that an individual places on their sexuality do not always correspond perfectly (Glover et al., 2009), with many sexual minority individuals identifying with a sexual orientation that most closely aligns with their behaviors and experiences (Morgan, 2013). Because of this, it is plausible that some individuals' awareness and understanding of their sexual identity and sexual experiences may change across their

lifetime (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Morgan, 2013). Forming an understanding of one's sexual identity is an important process which first manifests during adolescence (Fivush & Zaman, 2015; Morgan, 2013) and can continue across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Although previous models of non-heterosexual identity development tended to focus on stages or "milestones" that occur in a sequential order (e.g. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), more recent models conceptualize identity development in a multidimensional manner, with a consideration of intersecting identities (e.g. race and gender). For example, the Non-sequential Task Model of bi/pan/polysexual identity development (Harper & Swanson, 2019), demonstrates the complexities of individual experiences and identities, and attends to processes of identity development that do not occur within a particular order. Similarly, the Interpretative Sexual Landscape Model of sexual identity (Gordon & Silva, 2015), illustrates individual perspectives of identity development and how interactions with others may impact the interpretation of an individual's sexual identity. Interestingly, research suggests that there are many elements specific to the development of an asexual identity that are not witnessed within other non-heterosexual theoretical models (McInroy et al., 2020). Within their proposed model of asexual identity development, Robbins et al. (2016) identified experiences common among asexuals, including: an absence of social information surrounding asexuality, the role of the internet within the discovery and disclosure of asexuality, as well as a desire to educate others and promote awareness of asexuality. Most notably, Van Houdenhove et al. (2015, p. 262), reported that for many asexuals the development of an asexual identity includes several stages such as "coming to an (a)sexual identity, experiencing physical intimacy and sexuality, and experiencing love and relationships."

As mentioned previously, experiences associated with an individual's sexual orientation may be subject to other dimensions of identity such as gender roles and expressions within society (Warner & Shields, 2013). For example, while asexual women have been shown to experience greater level of acceptance due to societally expected "female sexual passivity" (Gupta, 2019; Vares, 2018), they are often subject to greater levels of sexual coercion and are typically less able to refuse unwanted sexual activity (Gupta, 2019). Conversely an assumption of male sexual desire as inherent may cause many asexual men to experience disbelief and denial of their asexuality (Vares, 2018). This multi-dimensional understanding of sexual identity and sexual orientation has gained prominence within the study of sexual identity and poses many implications for current models of sexual identity development.

Asexual identity development and heteronormativity

According to Thoits (1999), the development of an individual's sexual identity is influenced by cultural and societal factors and can account for varying levels of well-being. Identity development within the context of a heteronormative society presents many legal and structural barriers for non-heterosexual individuals (Morgan, 2013) and may lead to higher levels of discrimination and victimization. Specifically, classification as part of a non-heterosexual minority can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation, and stigmatization (Mayer et al., 2014) and this in turn, can negatively affect the development of a non-heterosexual identity.

The societal subjugation of asexual individuals due to their deviation from heteronormativity may be understood through Minority Stress Theory, whereby sexual minorities experience "persistent, excessive stress as a result of their minority status in a heterosexist society" (McInroy et al., 2020, p. 1). This theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding sources of mental health difficulties among sexual minorities, including stressful social environments, stigma and prejudice (Meyer, 2003). Although not studied extensively within the area of asexuality, features typical of minority stress theory are witnessed throughout literature. For example, research has shown a markedly higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with the asexual orientation, with many attributing this to discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Borgogna et al., 2019; Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). According to Chasin (2015), negative sentiments held towards the orientation, as well as a lack of acceptance from friends, family and professional misunderstandings, appear detrimental to asexual individuals' self-concept and identity development. Negative sentiments such as a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of the asexual orientation (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rothblum et al., 2019; Vares, 2018), as well as an assumption of sexual pathology, have been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships, has led to increased isolation witnessed within the asexual population (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Vares, 2021).

Although research surrounding the asexual orientation continues to grow, limited literature focuses specifically on the development of an asexual identity or attempts to *place* this within the context of a heteronormative society. Thus, through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study aims to investigate the identity development and internalization of an asexual orientation and how asexual individuals attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation.

Method

Research design

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). By asking questions that concern "how" rather than "what," IPA reveals the essence of meaning-making and lived-experience, particularly within the life narratives of non-heterosexual individuals (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Farmer & Byrd, 2015). Moreover, this approach grants an openness towards the diversity and differential experiences within a non-heterosexual community and provides insight into societal and cultural factors that influence identity development (Misgav, 2016). IPA's flexible methodology allows a greater understanding of the phenomena that relate to diverse sexual, affectional and gender categories (Chan & Farmer, 2017) and thus, is particularly fitting when investigating the asexual orientation. Moreover, as identity development and internalization are not easily reached and potentially outside of our "perceptual field", IPA may grant "more room for

Table 1. Participant demographic.

Participant	Sex	Age	Nationality	Sexual orientation	Romantic orientation	Relationship status
Stephanie	Female	25	American	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Gwen	Female	18	French	Asexual	Aromantic	Single
Vanessa	Female	29	American	Asexual	Biromantic	Single
Amanda	Female	32	British	Asexual	Aromantic	In a Relationship
Sara	Female	40	American	Asexual	Heteroromantic	Single

creativity and freedom," particularly during analysis and write-up of research. This will allow the reporting of results in an accessible manner, while adhering to guidelines regarding commitment, rigor and pertinence when studying existential experience. Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to engage in in-depth conversations with participants (Smith et al., 2009) and is therefore consistent with the idiographic commitments of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participants

Five participants between the ages of 18 and 40 who responded to the research call were interviewed. See Table 1 for participant demographics. The researcher and participants did not have any interactions prior to completing the interviews. Inclusion criteria included participants that spoke fluent English, identified as asexual and described a lack of sexual attraction towards others. Sex, age, socioeconomic status, and romantic orientation were not considered criteria for exclusion. Participants were female, identified as asexual and gave a common understanding of asexuality as a lack of sexual drive or desire directed towards others. Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Recruitment procedures

Participants were recruited through the online community AVEN between June and August 2019. An announcement advertising the research was posted on the AVEN discussion board along with researcher contact information and a statement detailing the research. Participants were not compensated. All participants were required to complete written and/or verbal informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw their participation both before and after taking part. Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board and permission to conduct this research was received from the AVEN Project Team. Following the interview, the researcher provided their contact information as well as details of sites linked to AVEN and other forms of support provided within the asexual community. Although sex was not a criterion for exclusion, all participants who responded to the research call identified as female. Recruitment was stopped when no new information emerged from the interviews and data saturation was attained. This may be seen through the replication of themes across interviews. Moreover, this sample size of five participants is in line with recommendations provided by Smith et al., (2009).

Data collection

Each interview was conducted independently through Skype and lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. During the interview, the researcher engaged in active listening and was receptive to conversation and the accounts of participants. The researcher allowed the participant to lead the interview, describing in detail their experiences or beliefs that were important to them and promoting unexpected developments within the conversation. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, questions varied between participants and topics of conversation followed suit. The researcher promoted the discussion of topics that were unexpected or appeared to hold significant meaning to each participant. Conversations were recorded using a dictaphone. The interview schedule was designed to facilitate a comfortable interaction between participant and researcher and was informed by extensive reading in the area of asexual identity development (see the Appendix). Questions were phrased in an open format and were mainly descriptive in design. Constructs that underlined questions consisted of cognition, behavior, awareness, context, experience, relationships, nature of relationships, time in context and disclosure. Any initial impressions were recorded immediately after each interview and these "reflections" or post-interview memos were utilized during the analysis phase.

Analysis

Data analytical strategy

To capture and explore the meanings that participants assigned to their experiences, interview transcripts were analyzed using IPA. Researchers employed a "theme-within-case" approach, analysing each individual's account (Smith et al., 2009). This was achieved through a double hermeneutic process with authors attempting to understand how participants understood their experiences and the meanings that they assigned to this, as well as using cyclical analysis of themes, moving from individual to shared perspectives.

The first stage of analysis involved reading and re-reading each interview transcript several times. This led to the development of exploratory comments that focused on semantic content and remained close to the participant's explicit meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This was followed by the development of initial codes whereby researchers reduced the volume of detail within the analysis, while maintaining complexity (Smith et al., 2009). Codes were then clustered into groups that formed emergent themes. The next stage involved grouping themes together to form main themes and allocating labels that best described the concepts underlying each cluster. At this stage, some themes were removed from the analysis as they failed to contribute towards the emerging structure or were supported with limited evidence (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This series of steps was repeated for each interview transcript. During the final stage of analysis, researchers observed the structure of each major theme and looked for comparisons across interviews. This involved a cross-case analysis of the five participants' accounts and led to the development of superordinate themes which detail how asexual individuals attribute meaning to the development of their asexual identities. They did this by reviewing theme maps and

Table 2. List of major themes and sub-themes.

The asexual self
Embracing the asexual self
The asexual community
Asexual pride
Discovering asexuality
The self as other
Means of discovery
Disclosure
Barriers to disclosure
Process of disclosure
Internal motivations to disclose
Reactions from others
Barriers to accepting asexuality
Asexuality as alien/Strange
Asexuality as negative
Hidden asexuality
Navigating relationships
Incentives for relationships
Boundaries within relationships
Asexuality as an obstacle

comparing verbatim extracts, memos and notes made throughout the interpretative process. A list of major themes and sub-themes present across interviews was then compiled (Smith et al., 2009). See Table 2 for a list of major themes and sub-themes. When presenting the findings of this analysis, we provide a summary of participants' views and a discussion of the shared meaning for participants that correspond with the superordinate themes. This allowed us to capture the convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account. We present our analytic interpretation through a narrative account that is supported by verbatim extracts (Smith et al., 2009).

Methodological integrity

Regular research team meetings and review of researcher interpretations granted credibility to the analysis and ensured the robustness and quality of the emerging codes and themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). This involved a process of peer debriefing whereby researchers explained the logic behind the decisions made and clarified their interpretations to one another (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This minimized potential biases and highlighted any oversights within the analysis to grant a more complete interpretation. Reflexive bracketing allowed researchers to complete a series of "reductions" which redirected potential distractions or preconceived assumptions of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA can be considered a double hermeneutic process, researchers continuously reflected on how their engagement with the data and area under investigation may have impacted their analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This allowed them to interpret the original expression or meaning within the text and granted greater insight into the phenomenology present. Finally, researchers engaged in a process called the "hermeneutic circle," whereby they performed a cyclical or step-by-step analysis of the data (Smith et al., 2009). This caused researchers to move between words, sentences and complete text during analysis and record or make explicit any preconceptions that may influence their analysis (Miller et al., 2018).

The role of the researcher

The first author conducted all interviews and gathered the data used within this research. This meant that the research was led largely from an "outsider" or "etic" perspective. During the interviews, the researcher was aware that their position as an outsider could shift the dynamic of the interview and may cause participants to doubt their ability to relate to a topic of discussion. Despite these concerns, the researcher did not experience any dubiousness or reticence during the interviews. Each participant spoke candidly about their experience, and the researcher got a sense that participants considered them trustworthy in their motives. To ensure that they used appropriate language and terminology related to the asexual orientation, the researcher familiarized themselves with the asexual community through platforms such as AVEN and Asexuality.LiveJournal. Moreover, the researcher kept a reflective journal in which they noted any preconceptions and assumptions both before, during and after each phase of analysis, as well as when completing the write-up.

Research findings

Five superordinate themes were identified: the asexual self; discovering asexuality; disclosure; barriers to accepting asexuality; and navigating relationships. While these themes were present for all five participants, their individual accounts were distinctive and subject to their varying experiences, romantic orientations, age and processes of identifying as asexual. The findings of this analysis will be presented through a summary of participants' views and will capture convergent and divergent themes from each individual's account (Smith et al., 2009).

Participant 1: Stephanie

"Maybe there's something else going on here"

For Stephanie, a 25-year-old asexual aromantic woman, a sense of confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and an awareness of herself as different from her peers prompted the discovery of her asexual orientation. This sense of difference was initiated during college as she moved away from her conservative background, in which "sexuality wasn't really talked about" and noticed the importance that others placed on sexual and romantic relationships. She described her college experience as a "learning curve" in which she became aware of herself as different from her peers "both personality wise and sexuality wise." Moreover, her involvement in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships during this time reinforced an awareness of her lack of sexual attraction and encouraged her to find a space whereby "it's ok not to want this."

> uh in college is when it starts to get more serious or more mature so that's what brought it to my attention I say oh now I'm having these encounters with men and I don't really know why I'm feeling the way I am or why uh why I'm having encounters with women and I don't know why I'm feeling this way. So then that ah prompted me to actually search "its ok to not want this."

This is turn brought her to uncover the asexual community which she considered as a highly influential mode of awareness and understanding. Specifically, the asexual community granted Stephanie a greater sense of belonging and allowed her to relate to the "common" experiences of other asexuals. Conversely, the presence of diverse orientations within the asexual community appeared to impact Stephanie's sense of being different in a positive way, as she described an openness towards varying sexual and romantic orientations. For example, while she defined herself as on the "extreme end of things," she acknowledged that "people experience asexuality in very different ways" and "view intimacy very differently" within the asexual community. This understanding of the asexual community as diverse allowed Stephanie to better accept her lack of sexual and romantic attraction and disregard asexual stereotypes such as dressing modestly or not assuming a feminine role.

> A lot of people think "oh I'm asexual so in don't wear makeup or I don't take selfies or dress a certain way" but if you spend any amount of time in the asexual community, you'll find that there's everyone is pretty different in all of that.

"Not something that I should feel guilty about"

Following the discovery of her asexuality, Stephanie described a strong sense of self-acceptance and considered her lack of sexual attraction as perpetual or how she "always was."

> So just acknowledging that it is part of nature, it is common, that nothing happened to me, no one made me this way. It's just me and my personality and how I perceive the world around me.

This allowed her to move away from negative explanations and acknowledge her asexuality as "common" or just another sexual identity. Moreover, her identification as aromantic allowed her to understand her disinterest in forming committed or romantic relationships and set the precedent that it is a "no for everybody."

"They had no idea what it was"

Stephanie described a casual approach to disclosure despite a consciousness of the perceptions of others. For example, while she placed some significance on coming out to her parents, she did not feel the need to disclose to her peers and believed that they would be already aware of her asexual orientation.

> Um I told my parents, they're my parents they probably should know. And they're the only people I've told with "hey let's sit down I'm asexual" that's the only time that happened. Uh other times amongst friends or people in my general age group sometimes people already know what asexuality is so when we do come into conversations of "oh how many partners have you had" or "what's the best type of canoodling you done?" and you say "oh I'm just not that interested in that sort of things" and they say "oh are you asexual?" and I say "oh that's a word you could use" and then we kind of move on.

This relaxed approach to disclosure appeared as a protective mechanism against experienced or expected negative reactions. Moreover, she considered other people's

reactions to her disclosure as dependent upon their knowledge of asexuality and understood her parents' negative response to her orientation as derivative of their conservative background and lack of awareness. For example, while she considered her parents' response to her orientation as a "big issue," she described her peers' reactions as more "open" and accepting.

> I had a big issue when telling my parents. They had no idea what it was they didn't know it was possible they usually just think "ah our child is sick somehow" and it's our fault that she's this way am so it's definitely good when they know about it when though most people don't it's good to just see people be accepting of your experiences.

Moreover, Stephanie related her parents' misunderstanding to her own lack of exposure to non-heterosexual orientations and again described awareness as key to others' acceptance. This is witnessed through her changing perception of non-heterosexual orientations and in particular, the prevalence of homosexuality.

> Again sexuality wasn't really talked about when I was growing up. I didn't know what homosexuality was until I was like sixteen and even then I thought "oh it's just a few people who are born every ten years off in the mountains" (laughs) not really common it just it's fine there's gay I'll probably never meet anyone who is and now of course fast forward five years and one in four people I know experiences same sex attraction. But ah yeah that's just to talk about homosexuality all the other sexualities I didn't hear about "til I got to college and had been there a bit.

"Someone to 100% get me ... connect with on every level"

In keeping with her aromantic orientation, Stephanie valued platonic relationships and desired to form deeper connections with family and friends. She described her ideal relationship as a "sibling-type relationship" and considered "conversational aspects" and "common interests" as "important," Moreover, Stephanie outlined boundaries within her platonic relationships and made it apparent that she did not desire "physical touch" or "exploring deep into the psyche of each other,"

> Because again I don't like physical contact and I don't really want relationships to go down that particular path of intimacy that involves physical touch and again exploring deep into the psyche of each other whatever.

The presence of these boundaries corresponds with her accepted understanding of her orientation and her ability to express her limitations within platonic relationships.

"I'm asexual and most people are not"

Stephanie related her sense of being different from others to her asexual orientation. Specifically, she described a "wall" between herself and everyone else and, at times, considered herself as "less human," This sense of difference appeared to emerge from others' lack of awareness and a general consideration of asexuality as a "very out there conclusion," Moreover, she considered how her inability to comply with

sexual and relationship norms caused her to explore "other answers or explanations for a long time" as she struggled to accept her asexuality.

Participant 2: Gwen

"Something was a bit strange really"

At the time of interview, eighteen-year-old Gwen had just recently discovered and come to identify as both asexual and aromantic. The discovery of her asexual orientation appeared to stem from a concern surrounding her lack of sexual attraction and romantic inclinations, as well as an inability to identify with other non-heterosexual orientations. Despite the recent nature of her discovery, Gwen initially became aware of her lack of sexual and romantic attraction during her first relationship. This delay in her discovery of the asexual orientation is indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality,

> But ah I knew ah it's been a long time I think ah since primary school actually since I ah since I met my first boyfriend in primary school … he was a very nice boy actually we're still on good terms ah still ah friends and he's absolutely fine now but I ah never really had feelings for him or anything (pause) and ah that's when I realized that maybe something was a bit ah bit off—to say it.

Moreover, a fear that her lack of sexual attraction may be derivative of her autism, mental health difficulties, or as a result of being sexually "repressed," reinforced her desire to later seek alternative explanations.

> I felt that something was a bit wrong with me. I didn't know what it was exactly (pause) I might have am trouble with hormone levels or something like that. I felt I had a mental health issue and so that led me to being ah repressed.

This led Gwen to actively research her lack of sexual attraction before eventually discovering asexuality. In addition to this, exposure to a gay fictional character appeared to enhance Gwen's awareness of other sexual orientations which in turn caused her to consider the possibility of being something other than heterosexual.

> Then I encountered the word am later I think it was a few weeks ago (pause) basically I decided to research some sexual orientations because I watched a video it was my favorite (inaudible) coming out as gay so am I decided to educate myself a bit in that

"They obviously know what I am"

Gwen understood AVEN as a source of support and channel for self-discovery. Specifically, she described how the presence of an "introductory post," as well as a "supportive" and "very welcoming" environment gave her a space to safely explore and be open with her asexuality. Moreover, exposure to other asexuals online appeared to ameliorate Gwen's previous sense of otherness and fear of sexual pathology.

> The people on the forums … the forums I go to the asexuality forums AVEN, they know obviously so am well my orientation is basically on the side bar. They obviously know what I am and have even am have even created an introductory post and am they have been very welcoming actually, very supportive.

"and then things clicked"

Gwen expressed gratitude towards her newfound knowledge of the orientation and felt "glad that there's a word that exists" for her lack of sexual attraction. Her sense of "relief" was apparent through her description of the orientation as a "simple word" that allowed her to recognize her lack of sexual attraction as a legitimate orientation and not derivative of her autism. Moreover, when reflecting on her past relationships, Gwen interpreted her behavior through her asexual and aromantic orientations, which in turn, allowed her to better understand why she "wasn't up to a relationship."

> But it's just a valid sexual orientation like any other sexual orientation so I'm as valid as anyone else… But to be fair I have met, heard of autistics who have sexual urge, sexual competency with a sexual orientation of any kind really.

Gwen's displays of asexual pride helped to form her sense of asexual identity and self-acceptance. Interestingly, her decision to wear "just a black ring" that she considers as "discreet" is in keeping with the recent nature of her identification and growing sense of asexual pride.

> it's a pride ring it's an ace ring if you prefer (pause) it's how you ah express pride in your sexual orientation when you're asexual. It's basically a black ring—nothing too fancy just a black ring that needs to be worn on the middle finger.

"Somebody just to talk to … nothing more actually"

Gwen outlined the presence of strict parameters within her relationships and sought to maintain non-sexual and non-intimate, or purely platonic friendships. She achieved this by making her physical and romantic limits evident to others and rationalized her decision through her identification as both aromantic and asexual. Moreover, Gwen depended on the quality of her platonic relationships and sought to develop strong emotional connections.

> Maybe somebody I can ah somebody I can ah have fun with. Somebody I am well ah just discuss ah somebody just to talk to. Nothing more actually just somebody who spending time with is pleasant.

"at first I completely rejected it"

A consideration of asexuality as negative and an inability to accept that she was something "different from straight" appeared as barrier to both the acceptance and disclosure of Gwen's asexual orientation. For example, Gwen understood her asexuality as a burden to her family and feared disappointing her parents by not providing grandchildren.

> it's obviously quite a lot to take in for my parents… Because basically they won't have any grandchildren from my side… Naturally they want me to be happy and am … but yeah it's still a lot to take in for them.

Moreover, Gwen discussed how a lack of information surrounding asexuality contributed towards her initial misunderstanding of the orientation, as well as current misunderstandings from others. For example, she described how asexuality is "completely unknown" where she lives, with limited exposure in media and news articles.

> I think ah there have been ah a couple of articles about it pretty recent and I think ah one ace I think was featured in the news last year but am (pause) yeah I the tv channel but ah pretty much flew off of the radars.

As mentioned previously, Gwen displayed her asexual pride covertly, with an awareness that the ace ring would not be easily recognized as symbolic of asexuality. Her use of the word "code" when describing the ace ring is again indicative of the hidden nature of asexuality and acts as a further barrier to the orientation.

> that's the code to say you're ace well ah asexual. That's how you recognize asexuals in public and that's how you can ah show pride. It's pretty ah… I like it because it's pretty ah discreet ah it just looks like an old black ring.

"you are the first person I came out to face-to-face"

Although she had not disclosed her asexuality outside of the asexual community or this interview, Gwen expressed an assumption that others would react negatively towards her orientation. Moreover, she feared that others would assume that her asexuality was derivative of her autism or that she had "invented" her asexuality. This reinforced a negative understanding of asexuality as Gwen incorporated her parents' assumed reactions to her own understanding of the orientation.

> They might tell me that my sexuality doesn't exists and ah another of my main fears yeah that I might be told am this is a pretty strange thing. I might also be told that my ah my ah I might act like that towards sex because I'm autistic too.

Participant 3: Vanessa

*"holy s*** that's me"*

For Vanessa, a 29-year-old asexual biromantic woman, the process of discovering her asexual orientation was initiated through a desire to seek alternative explanations for her lack of sexual attraction and overcome an ongoing sense of self-conflict.

> I have been having trouble dealing with but then the hyper-critical portion of my brain was like "no you're not asexual you just have a crap ton of issues" and it all of this and even as I was having this conflict in my head, I started doing more research into asexuality like googling asexuality.

Specifically, she wished to move beyond negative explanations for her discomfort during sex including sexual trauma, introversion, anxiety and body-image issues.

> I was never really comfortable with it (sex), and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or … because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like … engage with people.

Vanessa referred to fiction and YouTube as a mean of discovery, although she noted that this was supported by online resources such as AVEN, in which she gained clarity through other asexual individuals' accounts. This allowed her to move beyond a sense of "conflict" and make sense of past experiences surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

> I was like that's been me! Like those moments of like hearing other people's stories either through fiction or YouTube videos or forms online or things like and being like oh my gosh the moments that I've experienced, that's the feeling that I've been feeling. Those recognitions like that's what really helped me to start feeling like maybe asexuality is really who I am and it's not just a result of trauma. It's not a result of social anxiety.

"I got to a point where I was like 'yes this is me'"

Upon discovering the asexual orientation, Vanessa described an "immediate" recognition that was accompanied by a sense of relief and a "release of tension." In doing this, she positioned asexuality as an "answer" and "connected" with the orientation

> Like my first thing when I really started to believe it and really started to accept it was just like deep sigh from like every muscle and bone in my body. This just release of tension and this knowledge of like I was ok.

Moreover, Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as varied allowed her to accept her biromantic orientation and her capacity to engage in romantic relationships. This gave Vanessa the "space" to explore her orientation and engage in romantic relationships despite her lack of sexual attraction.

> let me explore it figure out you know is this something? Is this not something? How does this impact things? Does it change things? Does it not? Am so you know in that regards my, I currently feel very strongly about the term bi-romantic.

A sense of shared community was expressed by Vanessa as she considered AVEN to be a source of "comfort" and support system for self-discovery and the acceptance of her orientation. Specifically, she described AVEN as a forum where she could express concerns surrounding her lack of sexual attraction, share her experiences with others and develop a sense of camaraderie. For example, "seeing" or "hearing other people's stories" allowed her to "believe," "accept" and "claim" asexuality as part of her identity.

> the relief that like moved into exuberance when I had this connection was incredible and I try to remember that feeling when life gets tough and people ask me or say things that I'm pretty sure every ace person who I chatted with online has had some experience of someone just saying "will you have sex with me and I will make you all better."

"Have you heard about this thing called asexuality?"

Vanessa's described her past experiences of coming out as "painful," "uncomfortable" and "hurtful," and sought to protect herself when disclosing her orientation in the future. Moreover, she considered how her disclosure may impact others and concealed her orientation to protect her family from their own negative reactions. For example, her family's struggle to accept queer identities deterred her from disclosing her asexuality as she considered the stress that her disclosure may cause.

> I think it's more to do with the struggles that they've had over the past couple of years because they've tried to engage in the conversation about what gender queer is with certain members of our family and it didn't necessarily go very well.

These negative reactions, whether expected from family members or experienced within past relationships, led to Vanessa's cautious approach to disclosure and avoidance of romantic relationships.

> That I had difficulties in relationships, that I had difficulties around partners. That was very hard and that's why I honestly stopped dating and why I stopped seeing and socializing with people a lot because there's just something wrong with you.

Moreover, these responses to her disclosure appeared to later influence who she decided to come out to and how she approached this. For example, within her current approach to dating, she described initially disclosing her biromantic orientation and gauging others' knowledge of asexuality before coming out as asexual.

> the first round is definitely like the bi conversation and then if I think that they can go more then there's the asexuality conversation … am because I think if you can't accept the idea of me being romantically attracted to other people of different genders then you are definitely not going to get the ace portion of my life and who I am.

Despite an apprehensiveness towards coming out, Vanessa felt that disclosure was necessary when pursuing romantic relationships. For example, she described disclosing her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters.

> this is a conversation that I need to have and they need to be aware before I go further that if there is any sexual contacts it's going to be extremely minimal. Am and it's not something that I am interested in pursuing.

"Being very open and honest about it"

Vanessa sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and maintained a strong desire to have a family. Specifically, she desired "companionship" as well as a "committed" relationship in which both partners supported one another.

> I also want to find a way to have a relationship with someone that is committed in the way that I need it to be committed… We have this intention of being together and supporting each other not someone who comes and goes but you know, is more or less at home every night that idea of commitment as spending my life with someone.

Despite these desires, Vanessa considered the prospect of finding love as "hopeless" and attributed this to her inability to maintain a relationship with a non-asexual partner. Again, she recalled past negative experiences in which her lack of sexual attraction ultimately became an issue within her relationship.

> Majority of my dating experiences are—tend to be more like—they start out fine like no more than any first date and getting to know people can be am and then inevitably there begins to be issues and things. Either related to asexuality or other stuff like will kind of like fizzle away or stop.

To combat this, Vanessa described a willingness to engage in mild forms of physical affection and considered the prospect of multiple partners. For example, she did not expect to be "the sole partner" within her relationship and had "no

issue" with her partner "having sex with other people." She did however express her limits regarding physical affection and set strict boundaries that withheld sexual activity.

> I got to a point where I was like "yes I want to be in a romantic relationship, I want to have a partner, I want to have that companionship" ah like some amount of physical contact like I'm ah fine with kissing ah to a certain extent. I'm like very fine with like hugs, affectionate touch but just not sexual touch.

"have still not met in person someone I know to be ace"

Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as "other" was compounded by an assumption of stigma and doubt surrounding the legitimacy of her asexual orientation. For example, she feared that others would be unable to comprehend her lack of sexual attraction and this in turn, acted as a barrier towards openly expressing her asexual identity.

> the idea of being asexual is so far outside the norm…. The whole reason that I'm so anxious is because I'm afraid that my asexuality is so other that the probability is an awkward "we don't know what to do with you anymore because you're like a weird person."

Moreover, an inability to comply with sexual culture appeared highly stressful for Vanessa and she had, at times, considered her lack of sexual desire as "inescapable" and feared that others would be intolerant or dismissive of her asexuality.

> you just have these things that are never going to go away, and the vast majority of human beings aren't willing to like put up or understand you and that is a very hard feeling to live with this like the notion that there's something wrong with you and it's never going to go away and it's never going to get better.

This awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid, or a "choice" had previously caused Vanessa to question the legitimacy of her orientation and relate her lack of sexual attraction to trauma, introversion, anxiety and poor body-image.

> I was never really comfortable with it and I didn't know that it was because that I was raped or was it because I was an introvert or because I have anxiety or … because I was a plus sized woman it can be really hard to like … engage with people around sex just from like a body image issue. So I had like all of this stuff in my head, and so I was like it must be all of this like the reason I have issues it must be because of all of this and it was really classifying my disinterest in sex as being an issue, something wrong with me.

Moreover, a lack of exposure to asexuality contributed to Vanessa's understanding of asexuality as hidden and subsequent deterrence from the orientation. For example, she discussed how she had never knowingly been in the company of another asexual individual.

> I am different in a way that I had you know no personal, no known personal—like to this day I have still not met in person someone I know to be ace. I'm sure I've had interactions with people but I've not known going into or as part of the conversation that they are.

Although Vanessa identified as a biromantic asexual woman, she often portrayed herself to others as heterosexual and described being typically "assumed as straight." She recalled that she would "lie" or "misdirect" others when discussing her sexuality and would "inflate" past sexual experiences. This desire to disguise her asexuality within social circles appeared stem from a desire to fit in and to be "a part of that conversation."

> Like out in a bar someone starts talking about the sex that they're having or the things that they're doing, and ah for whatever reason I'm prompted to speak then I lie for lack—misdirect maybe?… I will call upon my past sexual experiences and inflate them and make them sound better than they were for me. Am, to just be a part of that conversation.

Participant 4: Amanda

"I sort of figured myself out"

For Amanda, an asexual aromantic woman, a sense of the self as different and "unable to relate" to other people's relationships, caused her to seek an explanation for her lack of sexual attraction.

> I do … would particularly notice that's there's a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically. Normally both together and its sort of, there can be a sense of being different from that.

This involved exploring other orientations as Amanda initially questioned whether she may be gay or bisexual and engaged in what she considered "awkward" relationships.

> I've tried different well when I was high school, I initially thought I was gay and then I started thinking ok, I must be bi like ok I'm not very good at either of these like ok. And I kept on going from one awkward relationship to another.

The failure of these relationships led to further searching and the eventual discovery of asexuality online. During this process, Amanda described AVEN as a mode of understanding and considered the internet as an invaluable "source of information."

> Am I think the internet in terms of increasing can actually help people increase their self-awareness. Am I'm not a massive fan of labels but if it increases your self-awareness, you know it can limit confusion and what not?

"Putting my identity down and a bit firmer"

Identification with both asexual and aromantic orientations allowed Amanda to understand her lack of sexual and romantic attraction. Specifically, this gave Amanda the opportunity to make sense of her experiences within past relationships and move beyond negative explanations surrounding her lack of sexual attraction.

> But I found the more I sort of figured myself out the more it sort of answered a lot of things a lot of past relationships had left a lot of questions … am, so it sort of

> answered an awful lot of past experiences, am I could have gone ah, this is because of x, y, z not because of who knows?

Moreover, her understanding of asexuality as a "spectrum" and the opportunity to "curate" a specific romantic or sexual identity strengthened Amanda's recognition of the self as asexual. For example, this allowed Amanda to engage in a queer platonic relationship (QPR) and make sense of both her and her partner's opposing romantic and sexual orientations.

> She's homoromantic heterosexual. Ah that's how she's explained it to me where she's like homoromantic heterosexual and all that sort of thing… Am with me she's homoromantic ace in that sense. Am but of course I'm an aromantic ace.

Following her identification as asexual, Amanda displayed her pride by advocating openly for asexuality and other non-heterosexual orientations. She did this by organizing an aromantic and asexual social group within her local community and attempted to educate members of her church about the asexual orientation.

> I mean I organize a local ace and aro social group. Because there wasn't anything out there, so I do that as well. Am if it wasn't out there I basically would—it had to be more proactive in that sense.

"they're quite accepting of it"

Amanda described a casual approach to disclosing her asexuality despite an awareness of the perceptions of others and a consideration of the process as "awkward." This approach was reinforced by past positive experiences of coming-out, in which she received acceptance and support from family friends and within her faith community. She understood this support through the "openness" and inclusivity of others and considered negative reactions to be rooted in a lack of awareness. She described the view that asexuals are "scared of sex" as "misconstrued," again indicating how a lack of information underpins these misunderstandings.

> but yeah I used to go to a book group which am but there was I mean am like there was one guy who was quite he made quite aphobic comments he was basically implying that asexuals are actually just scared of sex and I was like well, are you scared of female intercourse or of lesbians or you know and don't believe if they haven't heard that comment made at them.

"Find yourself out of situations unintentionally"

A societal pressure to "pair off" and to adhere to the norms of her religious ideology had previously deterred Amanda from her asexual and aromantic orientations.

> But you know especially being from a Christian background you've sort of got that expectation of you've got this ideal of loving relationship and you sort of just try to fit into that. That ideal which you've been told.

Moreover, an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation inhibited Amanda's willingness to accept both her asexual and aromantic orientations. She described feeling "left behind" within a "romanticized

world" as she could not take part in "couples only" activities and "talk kiddies" with family and friends.

> there's a strong emphasis on pairing up both sexually and romantically… Am, and your friends start suddenly start partnering off and the whole order. All their needs met in that romantic/sexual. And they've got married and they've had kids and suddenly you've done suddenly you've grown apart because I'm not sort of in their circles.

Moreover, minimal information and "exposure" to asexuality heightened Amanda's confusion surrounding her lack of sexual attraction. This was exemplified through a lack of readily accessible information, as well as her discovery of the orientation online.

> Well, when I first—it was mentioned—I saw it on a website, and I thought asexual what's that? I googled it and I thought—I was reading through the description, and I thought that explains a lot.

"it's a platonic relationship that's more committed"

Despite some reservations, Amanda's motivation to engage in a QPR was grounded in a desire to fit into societal expectations, as well as a need for companionship.

> it's how society's expectations to pair you off that has left me to agree to enter into it. Whereas it perhaps wouldn't be my first choice to enter into a QPR or QPP what have you a queer platonic partnership.

She actively rejected the romantic element of her QPR and set the precedence that she would not behave romantically or sexually with her partner. This understanding of her relationship as "platonic," or similar to a "close friendship," aligns with her self-concept as an asexual/aromantic individual. However, Amanda considered her partner's desire for romance as a "strain" within their relationship and described their current status as in a "bad situation." This stemmed from the presence of differing orientations, as Amanda and her partner's "wants" conflicted with the actuality of their QPR.

> I don't know if you ever had your best friend in school but imagine that as an adult and spending that best friend time together and doing best friend stuff but being an adult … am but in adult ways I suppose that's the best way I could normally describe it, but she comes on it from more of a romantic stance which puts a bit of a more strain onto the relationship but.

Participant 5: Sara

"I kind of figured—like that is what I called myself"

Sara, a 40-year-old asexual heteroromantic woman, initially became aware of her lack of sexual attraction during high school. Unlike her peers, she lacked interest in forming romantic relationships and was unable to understand the emphasis that others placed on "pairing off,"

> mid-high school when I noticed how everyone would be you know all the girls want to talk about boys and everybody starts you know pairing off… I'm like I'm not interested in this.

This disinterest in forming relationships brought her to develop an initial understanding of her asexuality, which she described as an independent process. Specifically, she referred to the terms "amoral" and "asexual reproduction" when devising a way to understand her lack of sexual attraction.

> Am but like you know "a" like I was mentioning amoral and when you read the Scarlet Letter or maybe one of those plays that you have to read back when ah you're in high school. Am I was just kind of like "meh" wonder if there is something referring to asexual. I had actually thought of that term for a very long time because of you know, asexual reproduction and biological senses. Am … so I kind of figured—like that is what I called myself.

Despite being aware of her lack of sexual attraction during her teens, Sara continued to search for her sexuality into her early twenties and engaged in a sexual relationship with a friend. She considered this experience to confirm her asexuality and her indifference towards sex.

> And just you know I had sex with him the one time and I'm like "meh" ok whatever, but I have no desire to do that again. So, like I did because I felt like if I don't ever try maybe I didn't, I'm not gonna know or I'm not gonna have done that thing that would make me have that desire.

Although Sara discovered her asexuality "pre-internet," she later used online resources to enhance her understanding and awareness of her orientation and acknowledged the role of asexual communities such as AVEN.

> But I only ever really thought to "hey I wonder if there's something I could google" like maybe five years ago (laughs) when I was thirty-five-ish and then I was like cool. That's how I found AVEN which is how I found you.

"Just kind of accepted it"

Sara's understanding of herself as a "textbook" asexual is indicative of how the orientation effectively describes and defines her lack of sexual attraction. In doing this, she reiterates both her heteroromantic orientation and unwillingness to engage in a sexual relationship.

> I'm pretty textbook… Hetero-romantic asexual I do have the, the romantic feelings towards men, I like men not women. And I also have absolutely no desire to have sex with them.

Moreover, a sense of community gained through AVEN appeared to enhance Sara's self-identification as asexual and reduced her feelings of being different. Specifically, an understanding of the asexual community as growing or "developing," reinforced Sara's sense of the asexual self, as she considered the orientation increasingly recognized and accepted within media and literature.

> Yeah that was when I determined oh this is actually a thing and people actually discuss it. I got one of those, I forget which book it is but there is a relatively

prominent book that everybody was mentioning so I read that just because I was curious.

"I kind of don't want them to feel alone"

Sara is selective in her disclosure and chooses to come out to people who she feels will be accepting of her asexuality or are already aware of the asexual orientation. She describes disclosing only to "very good friends" who she "trusts" or has "known for while." As a result of her attempts to "distinguish between people," Sara describes only experiencing "enthusiastic" and positive responses to her orientation. Sara also describes disclosing her asexuality to increase knowledge of the orientation and relates her experiences to other asexuals. For example, she noted that her disclosure may act as a source of "comfort" to other asexuals who are "struggling" or "having the same I'm alone in the world thoughts."

> One of them I have not had the discussion with, but I feel like I should probably bring it up with her at some point just in case she's having the same "I'm alone in the world" thoughts … but we're both clearly completely uninterested in relationships or perfectly fine living by ourselves.

Moreover, she often felt compelled to disclose her orientation to address others' assumptions regarding her single status and to avoid being set-up on dates by friends.

> People will notice that I don't have a husband and I don't date anybody, and eventually good friends will ask and try to set me up with somebody and then I'll be like dude you know, this is like the deal. And that's the only real expression that I would say I would have been when I discuss it with people and that's usually just when I have to bring it up either because of questions that they're throwing at me.

"they would think that it was just an excuse"

An awareness of asexuality as different from both heterosexual and other non-heterosexual orientations enhanced Sara's sense of otherness. For example, she recognized that "pairing off" happens for both her heterosexual and homosexual friends, and as a result considered asexuality as outside of the LGBT umbrella.

> I have quite a few gay friends but they're sexual in general and the relationships and the pairing off happens on that side too. The aces are kind of right in the middle, uninterested (laughs)… It does not really fit. I don't think it fits all that well the LGBT either.

Moreover, she considered how a lack of information hindered her acceptance of her orientation and others' awareness of asexuality. For example, she described asexuality as "inconceivable" and maintained that minimal information contributes towards other people's ongoing misinterpretations.

> I just recently had ah a friend who I had a discussion with and he was really not like, he wasn't upset, he was just amazed that that was like a thing. Because it had never crossed his mind.

Interestingly, Sara distinguished exposure to asexuality by "age" and discussed how this may have hindered the initial acceptance of her orientation. She recalled

that in the past "there was no talking about this sort of thing" and described how there being "no social media" contributed towards her "limited" information. Moreover, Sara acknowledged the role of research within the growing awareness and acceptance of asexuality.

> I have a feeling that you could count that on a couple of hands in this country. For people my age and older. Not because people think it's bad or wrong just because nobody is really aware and those that felt that way growing up just kind of accepted it and moved on and didn't really am think of the possibility. Now there is, there's research being done. People are more aware.

"I have basically kind of stopped it"

Sara desired romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership and placed emphasis on the security and comfort that this would provide. For example, she considered the prospect of a life partner who she could have children and grow old with.

> It would be very nice to have somebody as you're growing older, who would have children with you. Who would maybe take care of you when you're old and doddering.

Despite this desire for companionship, she understood her asexuality as an obstacle within relationships and feared that a potential partner would consider her asexuality as an "excuse." This sentiment was reinforced by a sense of "guilt," as she felt that a relationship without a sexual component would be "unfair" to her partner. This led Sara to consider rejection as "inevitable" and thus, contributed towards her unwillingness to pursue a romantic relationship

> You know, so I have basically kind of stopped. It seems like relatively mean to them because that's part of why most men consider part of a relationship so … because that's not what I want that's just a, I don't know. Just kind of a rambling explanation but… Like if a guy wants sex I don't know if I feel right am having him decide to am limit his relationship in that way because that's not what I want.

Convergence and divergence across cases

In the following section, we will discuss how super-ordinate themes manifested differently within each individual's account. Specifically, we will focus on how experiences associated with participants' asexual orientation were subject to other dimensions of identity such as romantic orientation and age.

All participants discussed the process of embracing their asexual identity, and how this led to a heightened sense of clarity, self-acceptance, and justification for their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, each participant referred to the asexual community and recognised its importance in the development and acceptance of their asexual identity. According to participants, the discovery of their asexual orientation was initiated through confusion, negativity, and a sense of being different from others. Although all participants recognized the role of the asexual community within their discovery, Sara formed her initial understanding independently. This is suggestive of the role of age within asexual individuals'

discovery and highlights increasing visibility and access to the asexual orientation.

For some participants, a fear of negative reactions, a general misunderstanding of asexuality and past experiences of stigmatization inhibited the disclosure of their asexual orientation. Moreover, this process appeared to be influenced by the presence of romantic or aromantic orientations. For example, Amanda and Vanessa's differing approaches to disclosure appeared to be influenced by positive and negative experiences respectively. Moreover, as a biromantic asexual, Vanessa felt the need to disclose her asexuality early on in a relationship to establish her lack of sexual desire and avoid confusion surrounding sexual parameters. This contrasts with Stephanie's account who, as an aromantic asexual, did not emphasise the need to disclose her orientation.

While participants' interpretations of their relationships converged on many levels, there were notable discrepancies when comparing their accounts. For example, while Vanessa and Sara sought to form romantic relationships that were similar to a sexual partnership, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda desired purely platonic friendships. Moreover, while all participants outlined the existence of boundaries within their relationships, this differed depending on their romantic orientation. For example, while Vanessa and Sara were willing to engage in mild forms of physical affection, Stephanie, Gwen and Amanda made it apparent that they did not desire physical touch or emotional intimacy.

Discussion

This study outlines the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual women's identity development, as well as how they attempt to reject and resist societal attitudes held towards their orientation. The themes identified within this study correspond with current theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, and experiences of minority stress that arise from a heteronormative society. Moreover, this study provides patterns of convergence and divergence across cases that are specific to romantic orientation and age. Although we acknowledge that experiences associated with asexuality may be subject to gender, the homogenous nature of our sample did not allow for the identification of factors specific to women.

Research findings and theoretical implications

Consistent with past research surrounding the experiences of being asexual, the development of participants' asexual identities was initiated through awareness of the self as different within society (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020) and supported by external resources such as the online asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; MacNeela & McMurphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016). As participants came to identify with the asexual orientation, they gained a more positive self-understanding, embraced their lack of sexual attraction to others (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and gained a sense of "relief" (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p.55). Moreover, it was apparent that

self-categorization with the asexual community subdued a sense of otherness associated with their lack of sexual desire (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020; Vares, 2021) and allowed participants to move beyond individualized self-questioning (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

This path to self-discovery corresponds with other models of non-heterosexual identity development, in which gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals engage in a process of self-questioning, experimentation and conflict, before eventually embracing their sexual identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Like our findings, online communities have been shown to assist in the development of non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe and relatively anonymous space to develop an individual's sexual identity and connect with a larger non-heterosexual group (Harper et al., 2016; Pingel et al., 2013). Moreover, similar to other frameworks of non-heterosexual identity development, participation within a supportive environment appeared to enhance the saliency of participants' identities within their self-concepts (Gordon & Silva, 2015). As these communities were typically accessed online, this reinforces an understanding of the internet as an alternative mode of non-heterosexual identity development, particularly when the identity in question is not readily accessible or subject to societal discrimination (Harper et al., 2016).

Throughout interviews, it was apparent that heteronormative ideals instilled a negative understanding of asexuality, with some participants considering sexual and romantic desires as mandatory and felt that were being excluded or "left behind." Like past literature surrounding asexuality, this caused participants to internalize a sense of compulsory sexuality (McInroy et al., 2020) and for some, acted as a threat to their personal identity and positive self-perceptions (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). This in turn, brought participants to doubt the legitimacy of their lack of sexual attraction and the credibility of asexuality within sexualised cultures (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, an awareness that others may view asexuality as invalid or a choice caused some participants to consider alternative explanations for their lack of sexual desire such as autism, trauma, introversion and body-image issues. This negative understanding of asexuality corresponds with past research in which heteronormative ideals contribute towards a more distressing sexual questioning process for non-heterosexual individuals (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Moreover, these findings also correspond with minority stress theory whereby non-heterosexual individuals may internalize negative sentiments held towards their orientation (Russell & Fish, 2016).

Similar to past research surrounding the experience of being asexual, participants' perceived invisibility of their orientation reinforced an understanding of asexuality as a source of exclusion and precursor to social isolation (Gupta, 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Again, this sense of invisibility appeared to stem predominantly from compulsory sexuality and heteronormative ideals (Vares, 2021), as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication that sexuality is an expected component of intimate relationships (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019). Moreover, this corresponds with past literature whereby a lack of exposure to similar others and to non-heterosexual communities have been found to exacerbate the hidden nature of non-heterosexual identities (Rosario et al., 2006) and reinforce feelings of inadequacy surrounding romantic desires and relationship

dynamics (Robertson, 2014). The prescription of heteronormative ideals can prevent information about non-heterosexual identities from being accessed or heard (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020) and similar to our findings, cause non-heterosexual individuals to doubt the legitimacy of their sexual orientation (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003).

As in previous research surrounding the disclosure of an asexual orientation, participants' approach to coming out was influenced by past negative experiences (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019), a fear of stigmatization (Robbins et al., 2016) and others' assumption of sexual pathology (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). As seen within proposed models of non-heterosexual and asexual identity development, participants considered others' positive reactions to be dependent on increased knowledge and awareness of asexuality (Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, some participants' concealment of their asexuality due to a fear of dismissal and rejection is reminiscent of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003).

Participants' motivations to engage in relationships and doubts surrounding the feasibility of a sexless relationship correspond with past research. For example, while aromantic participants sought companionship without an element of sexual or romantic attraction (Brotto et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), heteroromantic and biromantic participants desired emotionally intimate relationships and were willing to engage in some forms of sexual activity (Foster et al., 2019; Haefner, 2011) or an open relationship (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, like previous research on asexual individuals' relationships, some participants questioned the feasibility of a sexless relationship with a non-asexual partner (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and were subsequently inactive in their approach to finding a partner (Maxwell, 2017).

Future recommendations

As this research was carried out using IPA, the findings of this research are not meant to be generalizable to the asexual population. It is, however, recommended that future research should consider multiple genders when investigating the identify development of asexual individuals and processes of internalization. This may provide valuable information surrounding the significance of gender roles and expressions within the identity development of asexual individuals. Moreover, considering the role that online communities and AVEN appear to play within themes, future research should attempt to access participants through various means. This may provide a broader understanding of asexual identity development and processes of internalization that extends beyond the realms of the online asexual community.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Opening the Interview/guide

The interview will begin with welcoming the interviewee/greeting them through Skype and a brief estimation of time provided (approx. 45–60 minutes).

Body of Interview

- So as you know, today we will be discussing asexuality and I would like to know, what does that term mean to you? [cognition]
- How do you express this? [behavior]
- Can you tell me how you became aware of your sexual orientation? [awareness]
- And how did that happen? [context]
- Do you find that being asexual makes a difference to you in any way? [experience]
- Can you tell me what kind of relationships are of interest to you? [relationships]
- What would they be like? [nature of relationships]
- Can you tell me a bit about when your sexual orientation has had an influence in your life? [time context]
- Do you engage in sexual activity? [closed question]
- Have you told many people about your sexual orientation? [disclosure] Can you tell me about that experience? [experiential]
- What was that like? [experiential]

Extra prompts:

- What was that like?
- What do you think that means?
- Tell me a bit more

Closing the Interview

The interview will end with a summary of the topics discussed and a brief discussion on the steps taken following the interview.

Appendix VII – Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis



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Sinéad Kelleher & Mike Murphy

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Asexual identity development and internalisation: a thematic analysis

Sinéad Kelleher and Mike Murphy

School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify components of asexual identity development and internalisation in the context of an allonormative society, with an added focus on the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities. 99 participants between the ages of 18 and 72 (M=27.97, SD = 10.36) completed an open-ended questionnaire which was analysed using thematic analysis. Four major themes were identified: being asexual; becoming asexual; intimate social expression; and internalisation. Findings suggest that the process of discovering asexuality and identifying with the asexual community is a common experience among asexuals, and is not dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity. Moreover, the negative ways in which many participants understand their lack of sexual attraction may be related to allonormativity and the internalisation of negative attitudes towards asexuality. However, participants' approach to disclosure and relationships, as well as their willingness to openly express their asexuality appeared to be dependent upon their gender identities and the nature of their desired relationships. Romantic-identified participants typically sought emotional intimacy and considered their asexuality to hinder their relationships, and female participants experienced greater sexual coercion when coming out. The theoretical implications of each theme within asexual identity development and internalisation are discussed.

LAY SUMMARY

The research outlines asexual identity development within the context of a sexualised society. Evidence suggests that while discovering and adopting an asexual identity is a common experience among asexuals, disclosure and how participants navigate their relationships may be subject to other features of identity such as gender and romantic attractions.

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Asexuality; identity development; internalisation; thematic analysis; allonormativity

Asexuality may be defined as an individual identifies as asexual and describes an "absence of sexual attraction" directed towards others (Brunning & McKeever, 2021, p. 498; Catri, 2021). The asexual community and those identifying as asexual are in receipt of increasing academic attention and are becoming more recognised within popular culture (Catri, 2021; Mollet, 2020).

CONTACT Sinéad Kelleher sinead.kelleher@ucc.ie School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

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The asexual population is considered heterogenous with a variety of sexual (e.g. gray-asexual, demi-sexual) and romantic (e.g. aromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic) identities witnessed among asexual individuals, as well as diverse gender identities and varying attitudes towards sex and relationships (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Brunning & McKeever, 2021). Because of this, asexuality is believed to exist along a spectrum (Hammack et al., 2019) with some asexual individuals experiencing varying levels of sexual arousal and romantic attraction towards others (Bogaert, 2006; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015).

Asexual identity development

The development of an individual's sexual identity involves an awareness of the desires, behaviours and attractions that correspond with their sexual orientation (Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2011). For non-heterosexual individuals, this typically involves a process of self-questioning and engaging in non-heterosexual social and sexual activities (Cass, 1979), and may result in identity acceptance and disclosure to others (Rosario et al., 2006; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Moreover, sexual identity development may be influenced by both social and cultural factors, with individual components, such as age and gender, as well as group membership essential to this process (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Similar to other non-heterosexual identities, the development of an individual's asexual identity typically begins through an awareness of the self as different from their peers (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Mollet, 2020). Moreover, the role of online forums within asexual identity development (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016) corresponds with other models of non-heterosexual identity development in which the internet is considered a space to develop a positive sense of self and connect with similar others (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Harper et al., 2016; Pingel et al., 2013). There are, however, many elements specific to asexual identity development that may not occur within other sexual minority groups (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, a general lack of information surrounding asexuality may impede identity development and cause some asexuals to question the legitimacy of their asexuality and pathologise their lack of sexual attraction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, the hidden nature of asexuality requires active searching (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022), with disclosure considered imperative to identity development and the acceptance of a lack of sexual attraction (Robbins et al., 2016).

The role of heteronormativity and allonormativity within identity development

Within the context of a heteronormative society, the development of a non-heterosexual identity has many implications for sexual minority individuals. Specifically, stigmatisation and marginalisation have been shown to heighten distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Mayer et al., 2014), including those who identify as asexual (Lucassen et al., 2011; McInroy et al., 2020; Yule et al., 2013). Moreover,

allonormativity, or the assumption that all people experience sexual attraction, has been shown to hinder the development of asexual identities, with many asexual individuals experiencing dismissal, denial and prejudice (Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Mollet, 2020). The presence of these heteronormative and allonormative ideals may instil a negative understanding of asexuality, with some asexual individuals considering sexual attraction as required (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; McInroy et al., 2020; Mollet, 2020) or internalise negative stereotypes such as sexual repression or pathology (Brunning & McKeever, 2021; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022). Moreover, discrimination and denial have been linked to increased mental health difficulties and interpersonal problems among asexual individuals (Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013), and may be detrimental to the development of their positive self-concepts (Chasin, 2015).

Research suggests that asexual identity development and internalisation are not identical across asexual people (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019) and may be influenced by other dimensions of identity such as gender and romantic attractions (Cuthbert, 2019). Specifically, asexual individuals' departure from societally expected gender roles and expressions may hinder their positive self-perceptions in ways that are dependent upon their preferred gender identities. For example, while female participants' asexuality is often dismissed as female sexual passivity (Haefner, 2011; Vares, 2018), male participants are more likely to experience unbelief surrounding their lack of sexual attraction through an assumption of males being inherently sexual (Vares, 2018). Moreover, asexual individuals' management of relationships and the types of relationships that they desire may be influenced by their romantic identities. This is seen within research whereby aromantic asexuals typically seek companionship without an element of sexual or romantic attraction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), while romantic asexuals often desire relationships similar to an allosexual partnership, with some willing to engage in mild forms of sexual activity (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022). Moreover, research suggests that participants' approach to disclosure may be subject to their romantic identities with romantic asexuals placing greater emphasis on the need to disclose their lack of sexual attraction to a partner (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022).

Despite a growth in research surrounding asexuality (Mollet, 2020), further research is required to better understand the development of an asexual identity within the context of a heteronormative (Morgan, 2013) and allonormative (Mollet, 2020, 2021) society, and the implications that this may have for asexual individuals' well-being. Moreover, while there is increasing evidence for the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities within identity development (Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022), this has yet to be comprehensively investigated (Scherrer, 2008).

Thus, research focusing on the heterogeneity of this population may contribute towards a more inclusive and scoping insight into asexual identity development and the complexity of this experience (Antonsen et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Robbins et al., 2016). Through a thematic analysis of reports of self-identified asexual individuals, this research explores and extends our knowledge of the personal and societal factors that inform the development and internalisation of an asexual identity.

Method

Participants

Ninety-nine participants between the ages of 18 and 72 (M = 27.97, SD = 10.36) completed the questionnaire. Inclusion criteria included participants who were eighteen years or over, identified as asexual or along the asexual spectrum and reported a lack of sexual attraction. Participants identified as predominantly female (N = 61), non-binary (N = 14) and male (N = 10), with the remaining opting to self-describe (N = 14). The majority of participants self-identified as asexual (N = 79) or gray-asexual (N = 13) and several identified as demi-sexual (N = 4) or chose to self-describe (N = 3). For romantic orientation, there were a range of responses including aromantic (N = 32), heteroromantic (N = 21), gray-romantic (N = 12), pan-romantic (N = 11) and biromantic (N = 10), with the remaining choosing to self-describe (N = 13) (Table 1).

Research design

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical approach as it allows researchers to identify, analyse and report themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that portray

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

	Total (*N* = 99)
Age: Mean (SD)	27.97 (10.36)
Gender identity	(%)
Female	60.39
Male	9.9
Non-binary (third gender)	13.86
Self-describe	7.92
Female Self-describe	2.97
Non-binary (third gender) Self-describe	0.99
Transman, Non-binary (third gender)	0.99
Male, Non-binary (third gender)	0.99
Sexual identity	(%)
Asexual	78.21
Gray-asexual	12.87
Demi-sexual	3.96
Self-describe	2.97
Romantic identity	(%)
Aromantic	31.68
Heteroromantic	20.79
Gray-romantic	11.88
Pan-romantic	10.89
Self-describe	9.9
Biromantic	8.91
Demi-romantic	1.98
Homoromantic	1.98

Non-binary (third gender): An individual who identifies with more than one gender, no gender (agender) or are genderfluid. **Asexual:** An individual who lacks sexual attraction towards other people. **Gray-asexual:** An individual who feels vague and infrequent sexual attraction. **Demi-sexual:** An individual who feel no sexual attraction towards other people unless a strong emotional bond has been established. **Heteroromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with the opposite gender. **Homoromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with the same gender. **Biromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships with multiple genders. **Panromantic:** An individual who is romantically attracted to/desires romantic relationships without gender being a factor. **Aromantic:** An individual who is not romantically attracted to or desiring of romantic relationships at all. **Gray-romantic:** An individual who experiences romantic attraction but not very often. **Demi-romantic:** An individual who experiences romantic attraction after developing an emotional connection.

differences and similarities across participants' accounts (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, as thematic analysis encourages researchers to take a structured approach to data handling, it is particularly useful when analysing large data sets and producing a coherent final report (King, 2004). These features of thematic analysis are suitable to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' attitudes, experiences and beliefs (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Creswell, 2009) and are therefore consistent with the overarching aims of this research. Patterns within the data will be identified using an inductive or "bottom-up" approach whereby themes are produced directly from the raw data (Patton, 1990) and are independent of any particular interest or topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, codes and themes generated within this research will not be forcibly assigned to pre-existing categories or theoretical frameworks already identified within the area of asexual internalisation and identity development. Moreover, the analysis will focus primarily on the semantic or a "explicit" meaning of data and researchers will identify themes at their surface level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process will progress from description and summary of the data to the identification of significance and meaning behind trends in the themes produced.

An online open-ended questionnaire completed by asexual individuals was used to gather data. This was a particularly cost and time efficient approach to data collection and granted greater coverage of features such as age, gender, romantic and sexual identities. As online questionnaires ask questions in a standardised way, this contributed towards pattern-based analysis of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the anonymous nature of the self-completed questionnaire facilitated greater participant honesty and prevented interviewer bias (Emde & Fuchs, 2012).

Recruitment procedures

Participants were recruited through the online resource the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) during January and February of 2021. AVEN is a forum dedicated to creating awareness of asexuality, growing the asexual community, as well as providing information on what it means to be asexual. An announcement detailing the research and researcher contact information was posted to a discussion board on the AVEN website. Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board and permission to post this research on the AVEN website was received from the AVEN Project Team. Once participants had completed the questionnaire, they were provided with links to AVEN and other forms of support available to the asexual community. Participants were not compensated. Although 145 participants completed the questionnaire, 46 entries were removed as they partially completed the open-ended questionnaire or were under 18 years of age. The relatively large sample size of 99 participants was not predetermined prior to data gathering, but rather, was a result of the high response rate gained when the questionnaire was released online. While researchers were aware that "bigger" sample sizes are "not necessarily better" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 741), they felt that it was appropriate to honour all participants' accounts and include them within the analysis.

Data collection

An online open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data for this research (see Appendix). The questionnaire took participants on average 25 minutes to complete. Questions were phrased openly and were informed by our current understanding of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation. To ensure effective data collection and enhance the quality and extent of participants' responses, researchers adhered to guidelines provided by Emde and Fuchs (2012). Specifically, researchers used dynamic entry boxes within the questionnaire to encourage elaboration and minimise item-non-response, or missing data. Moreover, to ensure that relevant answers were obtained, questions were designed to be unambiguous, simple to interpret and related to the aims of the overall research question (Jain et al., 2016). This was achieved through review and several revisions carried out by the research team. Examples of questions include "how do you express your asexuality?", "does being asexual make you feel different in any way?" and "have you told other people about your sexual orientation?".

Analysis

Data analytic strategy

We began our analysis by immersing ourselves within the data through means of active and repeated reading, as well as making preliminary notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then coded all elements of the data that represented some aspects of participants' responses in a line-by-line manner. Once data were coded and collated for all participants' responses, we organised codes into groups that represented potential themes. We then reviewed the structure of each theme at the coding level and formed themes with accompanying data extracts. Once we were satisfied that the "candidate themes" adequately represented the coded data, we developed candidate theme maps to identify relationships between themes and to decipher the significance, or hierarchy, of each theme. We then considered the validity of themes in relation to the entire data set and whether theme maps reflected the meaning and sentiments present within the data. This involved a process of reading and re-reading the entire data set multiple times to determine the accuracy of themes, the structure of thematic maps and to identify any additional themes missed within the initial analysis. Once the structure of themes was accepted, the "essence" of each theme was decided, and a name was allocated to best describe that theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Table 2 for a list of major themes and sub-themes.

Intersectionality analysis

The presence of diverse gender and romantic identities brought us to later consider our findings through an intersectional lens. Although the inductive nature of this research did not require a guiding theory during study conceptualisation and participant recruitment, we later incorporated an intersectional framework within our data analysis and reporting of findings. This allowed us to examine the interconnection of socially constructed identities and how this may shape the experiences

Table 2. List of major themes and sub-themes.

Becoming asexual
Feeling Different
Searching for Sexual Identity
Means of Discovery
Being asexual
Identifying as Asexual
Asexual Community
Displaying Pride
Intimate social expression
Desires within Relationships
Asexuality Compromising Relationships
Avoiding Sexual/romantic Relationships
Reactions to Disclosure
Fearing Disclosure
Selective Disclosure
Internalisation
I Feel Alien
I am seen as Alien

and meaning making processes of participants (Abrams et al., 2020). Utilising an intersectional framework within the reading of our data allowed us to identify commonalities and differences across participants' accounts that appeared specific to their romantic and gender identities. This in turn allowed us to observe how gender roles and romantic identities may intersect within the development of an asexual identity and further illustrates the complexity of this experience. We present evidence of this within the results section, and specifically through our analysis of intimate social expressions.

Methodological integrity

Several measures were taken to ensure the credibility and reliability of emerging codes and themes. This included reflexive journaling (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999) and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as well as record keeping of raw data and theme formation (Halpren, 1983). The authors, both of whom have extensive training in qualitative research and multiple published articles, carried out peer debriefing to resolve any conflicting analyses and enhance credibility of the overall findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed researchers to move repeatedly between phases of analysis to facilitate interpretation and the development of themes that adequately represent the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All themes presented within this research are supported by verbatim extracts.

Results

Following thematic analysis, four major themes were generated: being asexual; becoming asexual; intimate social expression; and internalisation. These themes were apparent throughout all participants' accounts.

Becoming asexual

The theme "becoming asexual" is composed of several sub-themes that, when combined, detail how an awareness of the self as different caused many participants to

search for their sexual identity. This includes feeling different, searching for sexual identity and means of discovery. This process of discovering an asexual identity appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon age, gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity.

Feeling different

An awareness of the self as different from others typically initiated the discovery of participants' sexual identity. According to participants, their lack of sexual attraction caused them to feel "abnormal", "disconnected" and "different" from their peers and this brought them to search for an explanation. For example, one participant described feeling "weird" as they had never "actively desired" sex (Aromantic asexual female, 23) while another "had no idea what the hype was about" and "never got crushes" unlike their "sex obsessed classmates" (Asexual gray-romantic female, 24). This sense of being different appeared to be most salient when participants were exposed to conversations surrounding sex as they felt that they couldn't comprehend (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21) or "didn't connect" with what their friends felt (Asexual unsure/still questioning romantic identity female, 27).

> When I turned 25, I realized I had *never dated* and it finally dawned on me that that was *really weird* because I had run out of excuses like "I'm too busy with work/school". I realized dating had never been a priority for me. If it had been a priority. I would have found a way to make it work… So, after realizing I was 25 and had never dated and that was weird, I literally googled "25 and never dated" (Asexual aromantic agender, 31)

Searching for sexual identity

Following an awareness of the self as different from others, several participants explored the possibility of other sexual identities such as homosexuality and bisexuality, before eventually uncovering asexuality. For example, one participant initially considered themselves as "bi or pan" and described coming out to others as "not straight, probably bi, but I don't really know" before eventually identifying as asexual (Asexual panromantic female, 19). Another participant recalled how their biromantic and demisexual identities had caused them to be "constantly confused" and question whether they may be "gay" or "ace" before eventually realising that they "could be both" (Demisexual biromantic female, 27).

> I thought I was a lesbian or bisexual, even though I had great difficulties even imagining having sex (and I was too repulsed by nudity and sex to go online and "do some research" on what sex looks like). Eventually I gave up on the idea of being lesbian or bisexual and slowly came to terms with my asexuality (Asexual still-questioning female, 22)

Many participants' past attempts to engage in sexual activity led them to confirm or realise their lack of sexual attraction and discover their asexual identities. For example, one participant recalled that they "haven't had sex since the first time" because it wasn't an "enjoyable" experience (Demisexual demiromantic female, 20), while others recalled that they had "tried sex and disliked it" (Asexual aromantic female, 26) or were "repulsed and couldn't go through with it" (Asexual aromantic

male, 26). Moreover, some participants recognised their lack of sexual attraction while in a relationship as they had "so much trouble having sex with (their) spouse" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 42), or were informed by their partner of their lack of sexual attraction; "You know you're not gay, right? You're asexual."" (Asexual quoiromantic female, 34).

> I tried several times over many years to have good sex, but they were all unimpressive experiences. It took a lot of convincing myself to not blame it on something else before I researched asexuality (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37)

Most participants described actively researching their lack of sexual attraction prior to becoming aware of the term asexuality. This involved "googling" a lack of sexual attraction on the internet, with the majority "eventually ending up on AVEN" (asexual aromantic female, 23). For example, one participant "googled "25 and never dated"" (Asexual aromantic agender, 31) while another "looked up online different orientations" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26) that led them to asexuality.

> I did research on the sexuality by watching YouTube videos and reading internet articles. I had a feeling that something was wrong/different as early as 11, as I noticed that other children had crushes and liked to talk about "cute" boys or girls. At 17 or 18, I had still not experienced a crush and started to realize that I might never feel sexual attraction or want sex. I then learned the word asexual from a single video I found online (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Means of discovery

Participants identified the "internet", "YouTube videos" (Autochorissexual quoiromantic male, 25) and "online communities" (Asexual aromantic female, 21) as particularly useful sources of information when discovering their asexual identities. Moreover, several participants discovered asexuality by reading "articles" (Asexual biromantic male, 32) and "fanfiction with asexual characters" (Asexual gray-romantic female, 25), as well as seeing "ace discourse on Tumblr" (Asexual aromantic unsure, 22) and "TV shows" with asexual characters (Asexual aromantic male, 44).

> After a YouTube video of AufKlo (a German channel creating information videos) mentioning AVEN. There I read about it and educated myself further while realizing that there were always signs (Asexual panromantic non-binary, 20)

Online communities provided participants with an opportunity to further explore and define their identities. For example, AVEN gave participants the opportunity to "read discussions on the forum", "ask questions" and "private message other asexuals" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50). Specifically, participants described AVEN as a "a community of people who understood" their sexual and romantic identities (Asexual aromantic female, 54) and provided them with a "rich vocabulary" to "redefine" their lack of sexual attraction (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24).

> I always felt kind of left out between my peers because of a lack of interest in romance and sex related topics. When I was 20 I stumbled upon the definition of asexuality and aromanticism while looking for something LGBTQ+related. It kind of immediately clicked that those terms kind of suit me (Asexual aromantic female, 23)

Moreover, several participants discovered asexuality through means of friends' and partners' suggestions (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27) while others were introduced to asexuality by their psychiatrist (Gray-asexual aromantic male, 40) or therapist (Asexual heteroromantic female, 42). Moreover, a few participants described "stumbling" upon the term by chance.

Being asexual

The major theme "being asexual" is composed of several subthemes that underlie participants' understanding of their asexual identities. This includes identifying with an asexual identity, the role of the asexual community and displaying pride. The ways in which participants identified as asexual was not dependent upon a specific age, gender, or romantic identity.

Identifying as asexual

Participants described how they came to identify as asexual or along the asexual spectrum, and how this allowed them to better understand their lack of sexual attraction. For example, many participants recalled that their sexuality "suddenly made sense" and allowed them to accept their differences and for some, positively impacted their self-esteem. For those who identified as asexual, it was evident that the term "resonated" with them and allowed them to adopt an asexual identity. For example, one participant recalled that their "life immediately made a lot more sense" following their identification as asexual (Asexual aromantic female, 35), while others "identified strongly with the label" (Asexual aromantic female, 54). For some participants, this identification as asexual was immediate as it "instantly just made sense" (Asexual aromantic male, 26) and "described" them well (Asexual heteroromantic female, 72). Equally, participants who identified along the asexual spectrum (i.e. gray-asexual, demi-sexual, autochorissexual) considered the term asexual as "the most accurate orientation label" to describe their sexual identity (Gray-asexual grayromantic non-binary, 21) and felt that it encompassed "a wide range of sexual orientations, all of which have in common the complete lack of desire to engage in sexual intercourse" (Gray asexual aromantic male, 40).

> Finding out that asexuality existed came like a revelation that explained so much, and everything seemed to fall into place (Asexual quioromantic genderqueer, 33)

Identifying with an asexual identity allowed many participants to develop a more positive self-concept and better understand why they don't experience sexual attraction. For example, one participant described their identification as asexual as a "lightbulb moment" that "completely changed" how they saw themselves (Asexual aromantic agender, 31), while another considered this a "word for how (they) feel" and "not a me-thing" (Asexual, still questioning non-binary, 19).

> I first heard the term "asexual" online, but I knew that I felt "different" from my heterosexual peers before that. Discovering that word allowed me to address what I felt internally and helped me to understand that I didn't experience sexual attraction (Gray-asexual aromantic non-binary, 20)

Moreover, identification as asexual led to a sense of relief among several participants as they no longer needed to "fake" being sexual and felt less guilty about their lack of sexual attraction.

> My knowing I'm asexual makes me feel different because I no longer feel bad about not feeling sexually attracted to people. I no longer feel like I have to fake thinking a shirtless dude is "hot" (Asexual biromantic female, 25).

Asexual community

For many participants, the presence of an asexual community enhanced their identification as asexual and allowed them to better understand their lack of sexual attraction.

> I stumbled across the term online and didn't know what it means, so I looked it up and found AVEN. I could immediately relate to how they described asexuality…The discovery of AVEN allowed me to redefine a (sexless) relationship I was in at the time as a romantic one (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24)

AVEN exposed participants to "a community of people who understood" their sexual and romantic identities (asexual aromantic female, 54) and participants felt "grateful for the rich vocabulary to describe types of attraction that exists within the asexual community" (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24). Moreover, being part of an asexual community such as AVEN, granted a sense of camaraderie and allowed participants to no longer feel that their lack of sexual attraction was "defective" or "abnormal".

> Learning about asexuality as a healthy, natural preference lead me to the realization that I didn't have some defect I would soon need to get over in order to live a normal, fulfilling life. Identifying with the ace community has allowed me to stop feeling worried and guilty about my lack of interest in something that most of my peers consider essential to their happiness, and given me the courage to accept my difference as a positive part of my identity (Asexual quoiromantic genderqueer, 33)

Displaying pride

Many participants described displays of pride consistent with their asexual identities. This included hanging pride flags or the colours of the asexual community, displaying artwork, writing literature and composing music related to asexuality, and identifying themselves visually by wearing ace rings on the middle finger of their right hand.

> Have taken part in Pride marches, carrying banners. Sometimes wear a Pride pin or bracelet in Pride colours. Have also knitted socks and gloves. Have also written a novel… Post regularly but infrequently on AVEN. Follow some social media (Asexual aromantic female, 54)

Several participants expressed their pride by advocating for awareness and acceptance of asexuality within both queer and heterosexual communities. They achieved this by speaking openly about their asexuality and sharing their orientation with friends, family, partners, and the wider community.

> I wear a black ring on my right middle finger. When stuck in discussions about sex, romance, or relationships, I remind people that not everyone is interested in these

> things and that they are not universally necessary or enjoyable… I support asexual/aspec artists and creators. I encourage and ask for the inclusion of asexuality and aromanticism in LGBT+spaces (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21)

Several participants displayed their asexual pride through creating asexual content online and sharing their experiences on platforms such as AVEN. For example, one participant described making YouTube videos that explained asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and another shared "memes" and created "tiktoks" that educated others on asexuality.

> I have a pride flag. I'm an ace tiktok creator (Asexual Gray-romantic non-binary, 19)

In addition to this, some participants maintained a "presence online" and supported social media accounts dedicated to raising awareness and displaying asexual pride.

> …by reposting memes about it on my stories, partly to raise awareness (Asexual bi/pan/heteroromantic non-binary, 19)

Intimate social expression

The major theme "intimate social expression" details how participants navigate their relationships with others, as well as their experiences of disclosing their asexual identities. Sub-themes include desires within relationships; asexuality compromising relationships; avoiding sexual/romantic relationships; reactions to disclosure; fearing disclosure; and selective disclosure. Participants' desired relationships appeared to be dependent upon their romantic identities and ranged from purely platonic and familial relationships to queer-platonic and romantic relationships. Moreover, while many romantic-identified participants expressed a desire to engage in relationships with a romantic element, the majority of participants emphasised the non-sexual nature of their relationships, irrespective of romantic identities. When disclosing their identities, participants' experiences ranged from positive to negative and as a result, shaped their approach to disclosure and willingness to disclose in the future. Despite the presence of some discrepancies, participants' experiences of disclosing their asexual identities did not appear to be dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity,

Desires within relationships

When forming their relationships, participants expressed a desire for "commitment" and "closeness" that "does not take a sexual form". Although the nature of their desired relationships differed across participants, many sought "support" and "respect", and some "intimacy" and "affection".

> I would like and have always wanted a husband! i.e. a fully loving, affectionate, close partnership/marriage; someone to share life, love & affection; someone to plan holidays with; someone with whom to remain even when one of us moves in life. All the "normal" stuff in other words - just without sex (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50)

Most participants' desired relationships differed depending on their romantic identities. For example, aromantic participants typically sought "close friendships" without

the concern of developing romantic feelings (Asexual aromantic third-gender, 37) and a relationship with a "significant other" that "is much closer to platonic than romantic" (Aromantic asexual male, 26). Moreover, an openness towards queer platonic relationships (QPR) appeared consistently throughout aromantic participants' responses.

> Since I am also aromantic, I can't really imagine myself in a romantic relationship. It would be ideal to live either on my own or possibly with a partner who I could trust not to be attracted to me romantically and sexually, or at least not acting on those feelings and not making me feel guilty for not feeling the same way about them (asexual aromantic female, 23)

However, this desire for a QPR was not exclusive to aromantic participants with several romantic-identified participants also mentioning the possibility of engaging in a QPR.

> I want close friendships and would also be open to a queer platonic relationship. I have no desire to be in a sexual relationship with anyone. My ideal relationship would be a group of friends living together and supporting each other (Asexual demiromantic female, 21)

Moreover, like aromantic participants, several romantic-identified participants did not require a romantic element within their relationships and sought "friendships mainly" (Asexual biromantic non-binary, 21), or were "very happy in living a solitary life" (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21).

> "I want an exclusive best friend." Someone with a strong degree of independence from me, where we active choose to spend time and support each other - but with a degree of physical closeness greater than best friends" "take a healthy, functional relationship, and subtract the sex" (Asexual heteroromantic male, 23).

Many participants with romantic identities described elements of a stereotypical relationship in which they would cohabit with their partner and share interests and hobbies such as "cooking", "watching movies" and holidaying together. Unlike aromantic participants, romantic identified participants typically desired "something romantic, close and intimate" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26) and someone to "share (their) life with" (Asexual panromantic female, 19).

> I would like to have a life partner one day. To me, that means a person that I could live with for the rest of my life, cook with, share a bed, spend holidays together, and do other married couple things with. The only difference is that we would not have sex or do sexual activities. I have heard of queer-platonic relationships: I would be very open to one, though I think I would like a male romantic partner more (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

Moreover, several romantic identified participants revealed that they were willing to engage in sexual activity with a partner and explained this through a desire to foster "intimacy" and "closeness", as well as maintain their relationships. Many expressed the importance of compromising to fulfil their partners' sexual needs, with some enjoying sexual activity upon the presence of "trust" and "respect".

> My partner is allosexual. He wants sex, and I usually don't mind it. I just don't actively crave it. It can be enjoyable sometimes and it makes him feel more connected to me. It's a way to show my partner I love him (Asexual Quoiromantic female, 34)

Asexuality compromising relationships

Participants who sought to engage in committed or romantic relationships described how their lack of sexual attraction acted to hinder or "compromise" those relationships. For example, one participant recalled that their "differing libido with partners" caused "friction" and was a source of "conflict" within a past relationship (Asexual heteroromantic male, 23), while another questioned the feasibility of finding a "compatible partner" through the belief that "sex is such an important part of a relationship for the vast majority of people" (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27). Moreover, several participants described feeling "lonely, left out" and a "disappointment" within relationships (Asexual biromantic non-binary, 28) and felt that others would be unwilling to follow their "emotional and sexual journey" (Gray-asexual biromantic non-binary, 28).

> Incompatibility with non-asexuals has a huge influence on any potential relationships, and even in those that work well, it is still a source of conflict. Sacrifices and compromises have to be made by both parties for sexual-asexual relationships to work, and I still struggle with that. It's also hard to not desire a partner the way they want to be desired. Even though I can't help it and can't change that, partners can still feel self-conscious and un-wanted (Asexual gray-romantic female, 27)

Avoiding sexual/romantic relationships

Despite a desire for a committed relationship, several romantic-identified participants chose not to pursue romantic or sexual relationships and actively avoided dating. They achieved this by rejecting romantic advances and distancing themselves from romantic and sexual partners.

> I pushed them away and tried to keep them distant (Asexual heteroromantic female, 24)

Their reasons for avoiding romantic relationships appeared to stem from a fear that others would be unable to understand their lack of sexual attraction as well as an awareness of "how much society values sex" (Asexual panromantic female, 22). For example, one participant believed that a relationship with a heterosexual person would require "a lot more emotional work" (Demi-sexual heteroromantic female, 27), while another feared that their partner would consider them "broken" (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 20).

> I tend to avoid "dating" since the question or expectation of sex seems to lurk in the background and I don't want to deal with the hassle of avoiding or rejecting that… so it's easier to not date at all (Demisexual biromantic female, 43)

Reactions to disclosure

The theme reactions to disclosure details the various ways that others responded to the disclosure of participants' asexual identities. This ranged from negative to positive and for some, indifferent and unsurprised. For example, many participants recalled past disclosure of their asexual identity as "negative" and experienced "rejection" and "disapproval". Specifically, participants described others as "dismissing" and "doubting" their asexuality, with some attempting to "fix" or "invalidate" their lack of sexual attraction.

> The only other person I've told (after my therapist) was a man who was interested in me and he couldn't understand it. Kept asking questions (which is a good thing) but still was trying to fix me. The tension which ensued eventually lead to a blow up and the end of things (which is very sad because we had been good friends before) (Asexual heteroromantic female, 72)

This rejection was apparent through others' "disbelief" and consideration of participants as "late bloomer(s)", "prude(s)", and that their lack of sexual attraction was "temporary", or a phase. For example, one participant recalled that they were "looked down upon as prude" and "not mature enough" (Asexual aromantic female, 23), while another was considered "strange" "inhuman", "cold" and "like a robot" that "did not need love" (Asexual gray-romantic male, 36).

> I have only told ten people in my life. Most responses have unfortunately been negative. A lot of, "Don't worry, you're just a late bloomer," "You're just a prude," and, "Wow, that sucks for you." It seems like people want to convince me that I must secretly be miserable (Asexual aromantic female, 25)

Many participants recalled negative consequences that followed the disclosure of their asexual identities. For example, several participants considered others' reactions as "hostile", "hurtful" and "emotionally traumatic" (Asexual, aromantic agender, 31), with one participant having "lost friends" when coming out (Asexual, panromantic non-binary, 20).

> had a negative experience coming out to my family and if that situation repeated itself with a friend I think it would take me a long time to recover from that… My experience is obviously not comparable to a teenager being kicked out of their house and abandoned by their adult guardians, but my coming out experience was emotionally traumatic for me (Asexual aromantic agender, 31)

Moreover, several participants described others' assumptions of "trauma" and a consideration of their lack of sexual attraction as "defective" or pathological when coming out. For example, one participant was assumed to be "raped or traumatised to not want sex" and asked if there was "something wrong" with them "psychologically" (Asexual Heteroromantic female, 21), while others received "a lot of questions about possible trauma" (Asexual aromantic male, 26) or "sexual assault" (Asexual panromantic/aromantic non-binary, 21).

> I have told a few people. I told my mom, who initially told me I was not asexual and that I was just a late bloomer. She insisted that I would want sex later and claimed she had experienced the same thing. She then thought I must have been raped or traumatized to not want sex (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Many participants were assumed to be "just afraid of sex" and told that their lack of sexual attraction would "change over time" (Gray asexual homoromantic female, 19). Specifically, participants described that friends would "push (them) to date" and "dismissed" their "concerns about not being sexually compatible" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21). Moreover, many were told that they lacked sexual attraction because they "hadn't actually had sex yet" and that their "opinion would change" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 34) once they "get into a relationship" and "find "the one"" (Asexual aromantic female, 22). This dismissal was not specific to female participants as several male and non-binary participants also described

situations where others "questioned" or "contested" their asexuality. For example, one participant was advised that they would "change if (they) met the "right girl"" (Gray-asexual aromantic male, 40), while others were encouraged to "find the right person" (Asexual aromantic male, 26) or "the one" (Asexual aromantic male, 20).

> I did have one person say that I may not "be like this forever" which I think was supposed to be nice but it felt really patronizing, kind of like "oh you'll grow out of it" or "you'll figure out what's wrong and fix it". I don't really want to fix it. There's nothing wrong with me (Gray asexual, pan romantic non-binary transman, 29)

Several female participants described being "dismissed" when coming out and recalled situations where other people tried to "fix" their lack of sexual attraction or coerce them to have sex. For example, one participant recalled that "plenty of men will try to hit on me because they believe that I will want sex and be less prudish if they can convince me to have sex with them" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21), while another described how others "insist" that their asexuality is "temporary" or due to them "being a virgin" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26)

> I have had a man try to rape me to make me sexual, and I have had people think I was like a child and regularly humiliate me in public (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

Participants interpreted allosexuals' negative reactions to coming out through a lack of awareness of asexuality and their inability to comprehend a lack of sexual attraction. For example, one participant stated that other people "can't picture what it's like to not feel sexual desire" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 26), while another considered that people "who aren't asexual themselves don't really understand" (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21).

> Yes. Usually, it's awful. People generally don't really believe me…for most people it's like they can't wrap their heads around it. I used to be told that it was just because I hadn't actually had sex yet and my opinion would change after. It hasn't. I usually get asked all sorts of invasive questions. I've been asked if I was abused as a child (I wasn't) or if I was raped- which I did have an experience that I'd define as sexual assault following in the grand tradition of corrective rape- but I was Ace before (and after) that experience (Asexual heteroromantic female, 34)

Despite the presence of many negative accounts, several participants recalled the disclosure of their asexual identities as largely "positive" and experienced "support", "acceptance" and "understanding" from others.

> Yes, and overall, the experience has been positive. Everyone has been supportive and even if they didn't really understand what it meant, they have never tried to convince me out of it (Asexual panromantic female, 19)

These participants described the reactions of others as "proud" and "respectful", with many applauding their openness and willingness to disclose. Again, these positive reactions did not appear to be dependent upon a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity and were present across participants' accounts.

> I am very open about my orientation, and I have gotten very positive response from the people in my life (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 20)

Interestingly, some participants described an "indifferent" or "disinterested" reaction towards the disclosure of their asexuality. For example, they recalled the experience as "undramatic", with a lack of judgement or surprise from others.

> The friends have just gone "oh right" - straightforward acceptance/disinterest. Sibling didn't reply! But I think he probably thought nothing of it (Asexual heteroromantic female, 50)

In such situations, this led participants to not feel the need to further explain or disclose their asexuality.

> My family was pretty indifferent. No one asked me to elaborate (Asexual aromantic male, 44)

Fearing disclosure

Many participants described a sense of fear prior to the disclosure of their asexual identities.

> I've told a few people. I only tell people who I know will be accepting, so those experiences were positive even though they were still nerve wracking (Asexual aromantic female, 22)

This was apparent through several participants' description of coming-out as "nerve-wracking" and a "scary conversation", as well as their anticipated "rejection".

> Not as of yet, because I'm afraid of being rejected, not understood or not accepted (Asexual aromantic female, 23)

Moreover, numerous participants did not express their asexuality as they feared rejection and did not feel comfortable doing so "outside of the ace community" (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37), or "LGBT+contexts" (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24).

Selective disclosure

Many participants were selective when disclosing their asexual identities. For example, they based their disclosure upon the "trust" that they placed in others and chose to come out at "the right time". This selective approach to disclosure appeared to derive from expected or experienced negative reactions and an attempt to minimise others' rejection of their asexual identities.

> In asexual spaces and around trusted friends, I generally express myself quite openly on the subject, though when questioned by people who aren't comfortable with LGBTQ+issues, I avoid using labels specific to the ace community (Asexual quoiromantic genderqueer, 23)

Moreover, participants' selective approach to disclosure is also evidenced through their attempts to conceal their asexual identities from individuals who they feel may not accept their lack of sexual attraction.

> I only recently came to terms with being asexual, so I haven't told very many people. I told a couple of online friends, one of whom is also LGBTQIA+, and that wasn't

> very difficult because it wasn't in person and I wasn't worried about them rejecting me. I am terrified to tell my family (Asexual gray-romantic female, 22)

Several participants did not feel the need to disclose their asexual identities to others. This stemmed from a consideration of disclosure as "not relevant" and "not necessary", as they saw no benefit to coming out and rarely spoke of their asexuality with others. For example, one participant considered themselves the "same person" regardless of their sexual identity (Asexual aromantic female, 54).

> My sexual orientation is just not a part of how I view myself so I don't feel the need to share it with others (Demisexual biromantic female, 43)

Internalisation

The major theme "internalization" details the negative ways in which many participants understand their lack of sexual attraction. Specifically, the sub-themes "I feel alien" and "I am seen as alien" relate to participants' awareness of other peoples' negative understanding of asexuality and how they have internalised this. Internalising these negative sentiments was common among participants and was not dependent upon gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity.

I Feel alien

Many participants described feeling "isolated" and "lonely" due to their disinterest in, or difficulties forming sexual and romantic relationships. This left them feeling "disconnected" from their peers and "left out" of many life events such as dating and pursing traditional familial relationships. For example, one participant described their asexuality as "very isolating" and left them feeling like a "lifelong single person" (Asexual aromantic agender, 31), while another described a sense of being "very alone" (Asexual aromantic female, 35). This feeling of being like an "outsider" or an "outcast" appeared within many participants' accounts as they struggled to understand other people's sexual and/or romantic attractions.

> I still feel left out sometimes, especially when my friends talk about getting married and having kids and prioritize romantic relationships over platonic ones. I don't wish I wasn't asexual but I do wish it would be more accepted and recognized (Gray-asexual panromantic female, 24)

Participants' struggle to connect and empathise with others contributed towards this sense of isolation. For example, one participant described feeling "uncomfortable" when their friends discussed "sex related topics" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 29), while others considered their asexuality to form a "major disconnect with people" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> It's hard for me to relate to people when they discuss their sexual or romantic interests. It's hard for me to empathize with my friends when they are distressed over their partners or romantic/sexual relationships. I feel disconnected from most of culture and many things (sex ed, movies, magazine columns, etc) that presume I am driven by an interest in sex or romance (Gray-asexual gray-romantic non-binary, 21)

Moreover, participants described a sense of "missing out" on several life experiences as they watched friends "find partners", "get married" and "have kids". Again, this caused them to feel "left out" on many occasions and for one participant, "stick out as the only one who's single" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 29)

> ...my friends have gotten married and are starting to have kids. So, friendship is now not a priority for anyone. That's normal, I'm aware of that. But it's hard not to feel very alone (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

A sense of confusion and a lack of information brought many participants to question their asexual identities. For example, one participant questioned whether they may be "broken" and related their lack of sexual attraction to "anxiety problems" (Asexual aromantic female, 26), while another considered whether this may be as a result of "some psychiatric problem" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> Yes, sometimes I have the feeling that I am immature compared to other allosexual friends because most allosexual people seem to equal having sex with being an adult. Sometimes I wonder if I am somehow broken or just have anxiety problems (Asexual aromantic female, 26)

This confusion and self-questioning appeared to be reinforced by limited exposure to asexuality and participants' inability to openly express their lack of sexual attraction.

> Mostly it's just been confusing and I feel like I can hardly relate to people who are driven by sexual attraction. For me, it's kind of an invisible identity. Even the people I date wouldn't be able to tell unless I told them (Asexual biromantic non-conforming, 22)

I Am seen as alien

The theme "I am seen as alien" details other people's negative perceptions of participants' asexual identities and lack of sexual attraction. Exposure to these sentiments appeared to reinforce some participants' negative understanding of their asexuality as they experienced stigmatisation and were "ridiculed", "repressed" and treated like an "outsider". Moreover, this sense of alienation was reinforced through other people's understanding of asexuality as "cold" "unfeeling" and even "robotic", with some participants feeling "less regarded as a mature person" (Asexual aromantic non-binary, 37).

> Lots of friends told me that my asexuality made me inhuman and cold. Others thought that I was like a robot and did not need love... I have always experienced a lot of confusion about romance, so I think a lot of people consider me strange and treat me as such. People in my town treat me like a social pariah because I am not getting married and having kids like my peers and they tell me that women are meant to have babies and it's wrong for women to be independent. People at college think I am repressed and prudish and can be very cruel (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

This brought participants to consider their asexuality in a negative light, with repeated reference to feeling "strange", "wrong" and "broken"

> I do think that I will always feel like an outsider, as most societies are really sexualized and sex-focused but knowing that asexuality is real makes it more bearable. I think I otherwise feel like any other person, I just have this major disconnect with people. It

> is hard to understand people's obsession with sex when I cannot share their feelings, so I often feel isolated, but I think that is mainly because my lack of interest in sex angers people and makes them treat me differently (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21)

Participants repeatedly referred to the importance that society places on sexual and romantic normativity and the pervading sense that everyone is defined by some form of sexual attraction. For example, one participant described that they "will always feel like an outsider" due to a "sexualized and sex-focused" society and considered how "constant sexual themes" often leaves them as the "subject of ridicule among other people" (Asexual heteroromantic female, 21).

> There are entire emotions that others feel that I can't. There are life goals that are viewed as universal but I don't want. The topic so frequently turns to relationships in everyday conversations and media. It can be really othering at times (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

Moreover, many participants described feeling "excluded" as "society makes happiness, accomplishment and life goals mainly revolve around sex, love and reproduction"

> It kills me how I have been told all my life that not being in love and part of a couple was sad and how conditioned I feel by it" (Asexual aromantic female, 35)

Interestingly, several female participants felt this to be "especially true for women" because of the "importance placed in romance and having a family" or a "biological child".

> it is easy to feel different or like something is wrong particularly as a female as you are expected to have children and marry or have a boyfriend (Asexual unsure female, 27)

This sense of sexual normativity was reinforced through the presence of sex and sexuality within media and advertising, with many participants referring to the heavy use of sexual imagery and themes within modern culture.

> Sex is pushed a lot in daily life too, like in advertising and movies, and sometimes this makes me hyperaware of how different I feel to others - it always seems so natural for them so why can't I understand it? (Asexual panromantic female, 22).

Discussion

This study extends upon our knowledge of asexual identity development and internalisation within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society. Moreover, this study demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and romantic identities within asexual identity development and provides evidence for the complexity of this experience. Findings will be interpreted with reference to past literature surrounding non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models, as well components of asexual identity development outlined within previous studies. The themes presented within this study are not meant to be generalisable to the asexual population but, rather, to provide insight into the experiences and nuances that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation.

The demographic profile of participants included within this research aligns with the diverse range of gender and romantic identities reported within literature (Kelleher et al., 2022). For example, the significant number of gender non-binary

participants within our sample supports evidence that a higher proportion of people do not identify as men or women within the asexual community (Greaves et al., 2021; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Rothblum et al., 2020). Moreover, the prevalence of asexual women corresponds with previous reports of gender divisions among asexual people and the probability that women are more likely to be asexual (Bianchi, 2018; Hinderliter, 2009; Rothblum et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2022). Similarly, the lesser number of asexual men recruited within this research coincides with demographic profiles seen throughout literature (Bianchi, 2018; Rothblum et al., 2020). Finally, the diverse range of romantic and sexual identities reported within this study contributes towards a growing awareness of the asexual community as heterogeneous (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Clark & Zimmerman, 2022; Weis et al., 2017) and coincides with evidence that suggests asexual people are less likely to identify as heteroromantic (Antonsen et al., 2020).

Discovering asexuality and being asexual

The process of discovering an asexual identity appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon a specific gender, sexual or romantic identity. The consistent nature of this process within participants' accounts may be interpreted through the influence of allonormativity and the belief that all individuals experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, romantic or gender identity (Mollet & Lackman, 2021). Like previous research, discovery of an asexual identity involved a process of active searching that was initiated through an awareness of the self as different and an inability to relate to others (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019). Moreover, participants' desire to seek explanations for their lack of sexual attraction corresponds with past research surrounding the experience of being asexual (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and components of asexual identity development (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Robbins et al., 2016). Finally, several participants' reports of past attempts to engage in sexual activity and exploration of other sexual identities prior to the discovery of their asexuality correspond with the experiences of many asexual (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022) and non-heterosexual individuals (Rosario et al., 2006).

Participants' discovery of asexuality as a sexual identity through online communities, fanfiction and asexuality-specific literature corresponds with the role of the internet as a source of information (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019), and highlights the relatively hidden nature of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). Conversely, several participants' initial exposure to asexuality through others' suggestions, is indicative of the growing profile of asexuality and increasing recognition within society (Carrigan, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

Consistent with previous investigations, participants' identification as asexual was assisted by a sense of community and reinforced through displays of pride (Foster et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015;

Robbins et al., 2016). Again, this process of identifying as asexual appeared to be a common experience among participants and was not dependent upon gender, or a specific sexual or romantic identity. Participants' sense of relief following their identification as asexual is in line with previous research (Andersson, 2010; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021), and further highlights how an awareness of one's sexual identity and a sense of belonging can impact self-esteem and positive self-perceptions. Moreover, repeated reference to asexual communities such as AVEN further outlines the role of online forums and discussion boards within the development of an asexual identity. These findings confirm many asexual individuals' desire to increase awareness of asexuality (Brotto et al., 2010; Gupta, 2017; Scherrer, 2008), through displays of pride such as asexuality-specific artwork, literature and music.

Navigating relationships and disclosure

Participants' desired relationships appeared to be dependent upon their romantic identities and ranged from purely platonic and familial relationships to queer-platonic and romantic relationships. Like previous research surrounding asexual individuals' desired relationships, romantic-identified participants typically sought emotional intimacy (Foster et al., 2019; Haefner, 2011; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022), whereas aromantic participants sought friendships mainly (Brotto et al., 2010; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Maxwell, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Participants did however emphasise the non-sexual nature of their relationships, irrespective of their romantic identities.

The nature of participants' desired relationships appeared to impact how they pursued those relationships, as well as others' reactions to their asexuality. For example, many romantic-identified participants considered their asexuality to hinder or compromise their success within relationships and subsequently take a passive approach to dating (Dawson et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2017; Vares, 2018, 2021). This consideration of asexuality as compromising relationships appears to stem from past experiences of dating and the influence of allonormativity, and confirms previous research surrounding the perceived practicalities of a relationship with a non-asexual partner (Dawson et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021). Moreover, several participants' willingness to engage in sexual activity is in keeping with research surrounding asexual individuals' desire to maintain relationships (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Foster et al., 2019; Gupta, 2017; Haefner, 2011; Jolene Sloan, 2015; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; Mollet, 2020).

Similar to past research surrounding the intersection of gender and identity, several female participants experienced sexual coercion when coming out (Gupta, 2019). Although Gupta (2019, p. 1197) suggests that male asexuals experience "greater conflict with dominant gendered sexual norms", this appeared to be most salient within female participants' accounts. This corresponds with emerging literature surrounding the gendered experiences of asexual people and specifically, the assumption of female sexual passivity (Yang, 2021; Vares, 2018). Reactions did, however, range from negative to positive and for some, indifferent and unsurprised. While some participants experienced support and understanding (Mitchell & Hunnicutt,

2019; Robbins et al., 2016), many experienced rejection and dismissal of their asexual identities (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Mollet & Lackman, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018), which later influenced their approach to coming out (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022).

This denial of participants' asexual identities, and an assumption that their lack of sexual attraction is subject to change, may be attributed to allonormativity (Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019), as well as the invisibility of asexuality within society (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016). Moreover, other people's assumptions of sexual pathology corresponds with past research surrounding the disclosure of an asexual identity (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020) and the belief that all people experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, gender or romantic identity (Mollet, 2021). Interestingly, several participants did not feel the need to openly express their lack of sexual attraction and believed that their asexuality was of minor significance to them. This aligns with past research whereby identity acceptance is an internal process for some individuals and is not necessarily dependent upon disclosure (Dawson et al., 2019; Mollet, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016).

Internalisations

Participants' negative understanding of their lack of sexual attraction and an understanding of the self as "alien" may again be attributed to allonormativity and the internalisation of negative attitudes held towards asexuality. Repeated consideration of the self as "isolated" and "broken" reinforces our understanding of the impact that allonormative ideals can have on asexual individuals' positive self-perceptions and corresponds with previous research (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Gupta, 2017; Kelleher & Murphy, 2022; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, the sexualisation of media, popular culture and advertising appears to enhance a sense of isolation amongst participants and the perceived invisibility of asexuality (Gupta, 2017; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Although a negative understanding of asexuality was not dependent on a specific sexual, romantic or gender identity, this sense of exclusion was considered especially salient among female participants. This may be due to both heteronormative and allonormative ideals, and the importance placed among women on complying with traditional family structures and gender roles (Gupta, 2019). Moreover, "amatonormativity" or the assumption that "a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans" (Brake, 2011, p. 88) may contribute towards a heightened sense of isolation among aromantic participants (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022).

Implications, limitations and future research

This research identifies components of asexual identity development and internalisation within the context of a heteronormative and allonormative society, and develops upon previous research within the area (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022). Moreover, by observing the heterogenous nature of the study population, this research provides

a more inclusive insight into asexual identity development and the complexity of this experience. The components identified within this study are not intended to be universally applied to asexual identity development but rather provide an insight into the experiences common within this population. Moreover, the range of sexual, romantic and gender identities present within this study corresponds with the heterogeneous nature of the asexual population (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Weis et al., 2017). The themes present within this study do not position asexual identity development as a linear process and do not attempt to model this across stages of development.

Several practical and theoretical implications may be derived from this study and applied within future research. To begin, the relatively congruent nature of participants' accounts may be interpreted with reference to allonormativity, with few discrepancies seen across romantic, sexual and gender identities. For example, the process of discovering and identifying with an asexual identity appears to be a common experience among asexuals and is subject to the belief that all individuals experience sexual attraction regardless of sexual, romantic or gender identity. Moreover, these findings support research surrounding the role of the asexual community within the development of an asexual identity, and commonalities surrounding pride, alienation and the hidden nature of asexuality. The use of a diverse participant pool does, however, provide a preliminary insight into aspects of asexual individuals' experiences that are subject to romantic and gendered features of identity. For example, asexual individuals' approach to disclosure and how they navigate relationships appears to be influenced by their gender identities and the nature of their desired relationships. This in turn appears to impact how participants understand their lack of sexual attraction as well as their willingness to openly express their asexuality. Moreover, this may provide further insight into our understanding of asexuality as a gendered phenomenon (Gupta, 2019) and follows the movement towards differentiating romantic and sexual orientation within research (Brown et al., 2022).

There are several limitations present within this study that require consideration. As participants were gathered through the online asexual community AVEN, this removed the presence of asexual individuals who do not have access to online forums. Considering the significance of the asexual community within participants' accounts, this may have narrowed our assessment of asexual identity development and processes of internalisation. Future research should examine the identity development and internalisation of individuals who are not recruited through online forums and asexuality-specific websites. This may provide key insights into the development of an asexual identity without the presence of an online community, as well as alternative sources of information and support. The use of an open-ended questionnaire when gathering participant information posed some limitations. For example, this hindered participants' ability to ask follow-up questions and did not allow the researcher to gain further information or explore an interesting topic. Moreover, when published online, the nature of the recruitment advertisement may have resulted in self-selection bias amongst participants. As the recruitment advertisement specified a focus on the attitudes, experiences and beliefs associated with the asexual orientation, this may have deterred participants who had recently learned of asexuality and had yet come to terms with their orientation. Although intersectionality was incorporated within our analysis and presentation of findings, future

research may benefit from utilising an intersectional lens earlier on in study design. As outlined by Abrams et al. (2020), employing an intersectional approach during the initial stages of qualitative research may assist in determining participant recruitment procedures as well as data gathering techniques that are most appropriate to the study aims. For example, an absence of demographic information has limited the capacity to provide a more comprehensive review of sample characteristics beyond sexual/romantic orientation and gender identity. Therefore applying an intersectional framework during study conceptualisation, recruitment and data gathering, may provide a more comprehensive insight into the multidimensional nature of participants' identities, as well as their lived realities (Abrams et al., 2020). Moreover, this may generate more robust and nuanced findings surrounding the intersection of participant identities and encourage researchers to consider how sample characteristics such as race/ethnicity, social class, education and geographical location shape the experiences of asexual individuals.

Notes on contributors

Sinéad Kelleher is a PhD candidate and Head Tutor at the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork. Her research interests include human sexuality, developmental psychology, social psychology, and psychometrics.

Mike Murphy is a Lecturer in Applied Psychology, and Research Coordinator of the Doctoral Programme in Clinical Psychology, in University College Cork, Ireland. His research interests include human sexuality, social support, and positive & coaching psychology.

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Appendix

Open-Ended Questionnaire

Demographic questions:
Please state your age:
Please indicate your preferred gender (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Male
- Female
- Transwoman
- Transman
- Non-binary (third gender)
- Self-describe

Please state your preferred sexual orientation (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Asexual
- Grey-asexual
- Demisexual
- Self-describe

Please state your preferred romantic orientation (several options will be provided as well as the option to self-describe)

- Heteromantic
- Homoromantic
- Biromantic
- Panromantic
- Demiromantic
- Aromantic
- Greyromantic
- Self-describe

Open-ended Questions:

- What does the term asexuality mean to you?
- How do you express your asexuality?

- How did you become aware of your asexual orientation?
- Does being asexual make you feel different in any way?
- What sort of close, personal relationships are of interest to you?
- Has your sexual orientation ever had an influence in your life?
- How, if at all, do you think your life would have been different if you were not asexual?
- Do you engage in sexual activity? Can you elaborate on why you choose to engage or not engage in sexual activity?
- Have you told other people about your sexual orientation? If so, what was that experience like?

Appendix VIII – "And then things clicked" – Developing a measure of asexual identity development

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"And then things clicked" – Developing a Measure of Asexual Identity Development

Sinéad Kelleher[1,*]

[1] *School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.*
[*] *Corresponding author: sinead.kelleher@ucc.ie*

Abstract

Asexuality is best defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards other people that is not explained by a physical or psychological disorder. Like homosexuality and bisexuality, asexuality is recognised as a minority sexual orientation, with approximately 1.05% of the population (70 million) believed to be asexual. Recent research suggests that asexual people experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression when compared to both their heterosexual (i.e., straight) and non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual) peers. This may be as a result of negative attitudes held towards asexual people, and a lack of recognition of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. My research comprises of the steps taken to develop a psychometric tool to identify aspects of asexual identity development and internalisation. This will provide a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better evaluate the processes contributing to such heightened levels of depression and anxiety amongst asexual individuals.

Keywords: psychometrics, identity development, internalisation, gender, sexuality.

"In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity"

— Erik H. Erikson

Introduction

Asexuality is best defined as when a individual does not experience sexual attraction towards other people and this is not explained by a physical or psychological disorder. According to members of the asexual community, asexuality is a sexual orientation that includes a broad spectrum of sub-identities and unlike celibacy, is an intrinsic part of who they are. Like homosexuality and bisexuality, asexuality is recognised as a minority sexual orientation, with

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approximately 1.05% of the population (70 million) believed to be asexual.[1] Despite a growing recognition of sexual and gender diversity within society, asexuality and the experience of being asexual remains largely unknown. This is because it is only relatively recently that an asexual movement emerged and led to the development of asexuality specific communities such as the Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN). Features of someone's identity such as their race, gender, religion, age and sexuality play a key role in how they understand their position within society, as well as how they make sense of the opportunities and challenges that they face. In psychology, this involves an awareness of the qualities that are unique to them as an individual and is strongly associated with their self-image, sense of belonging and evaluation of their self-worth.[10] Because of this, developing a positive sense of identity is considered fundamental to well-being, confidence, sense of belonging and ultimately, how someone sees themselves.[7] However, aspects of someone's identity may influence how they are perceived within society as well as their interactions with others. For example, a lack of acceptance may hinder the development of a positive sense of identity and in some cases, cause an individual to integrate negative attitudes or ideals into their own self-worth. This in turn, may result in anxiety, insecurity and in some instances may be detrimental to an individual's mental health[9]. Recent research suggests that asexual people experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression when compared to both their heterosexual (i.e., straight) and non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual) peers.[12] This may be as a result of negative attitudes held towards asexual people, and a lack of recognition of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. For example, many asexual people describe experiences of ridicule, disbelief, and the dismissal of their asexual identity, which they attribute to a lack of understanding within a largely sex-positive society. The sources of these negative attitudes can vary, but stem predominantly from partners, friends and family, as well as social, educational and clinical misunderstandings.[3–5] As the prevalence of those who do not experience sexual attraction continues to rise, so too does the need for research to fully uncover the orientation of asexuality and the experiences of asexual people. The asexual community, allies and researchers alike, are becoming increasingly concerned with uncovering the processes that surround asexual identity development and in doing this, aim to alleviate mental health issues associated with the orientation. As part of my PhD research and as an ally to the asexual community, I will develop a tool to successfully identify aspects of asexual identity development and internalisation. This has been divided into four studies that include a systematic literature review, two qualitative investigations and finally, the collection of quantitative data and psychometric evaluation. The completion of these studies will provide a theoretical foundation to inform sex education as well as the application of theory and knowledge within clinical settings to better identify the processes contributing to heightened levels of depression and anxiety amongst asexual individuals. Ultimately, this research seeks to effect social/attitudinal change and to promote a growing openness towards diversity and varied human sexualities.

Measuring Asexual Identity Development

In psychology, education and social science, psychometric tools allow us to measure characteristics or 'psychological constructs' that cannot be observed directly. Examples of such constructs include intelligence, personality traits, attitudes and abilities. This involves asking people a series of questions that are representative of the construct being measured and assigning scores to their responses. To ensure that a psychometric scale successfully measures the given construct, researchers must apply a systematic approach to scale development. This involves completing a series of steps including; construct conceptualisation, 'item' or question generation, content analysis and finally, evaluating the structure and 'fitness' of the scale through statistical analysis.[6] The current paper outlines both completed and ongoing studies that aim to develop a psychometric scale to assess asexual identity development and internalisation.

Construct Conceptualisation

Prior to developing a psychometric scale, researchers must have a clear understanding of the construct that they wish to measure and should be able to accurately define concepts and theories in relation to their target population.[2] In the context of this research, the development of an asexual identity involves a process of searching and becoming aware of oneself as asexual, disclosure and interactions with others. Moreover, the target population is defined as individuals who do not experience sexual attraction and identify along the asexual spectrum. This conceptualisation has been informed by the completion of studies one, two and three.

Item Generation

Study 1

The first study *'Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Scoping Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence'* identified published literature within the subject area and helped to better outline the goals and conceptualisations of this research.[3] Through a review of 29 articles, we outlined what is currently known about asexual identity development and internalisation, as well as the major challenges that underlie this process. Themes include understanding asexuality, coming to an asexual identity, stigmatisation and the need to educate, isolation and invisibility, disclosure, individual differences, negotiating relationships, and conservative sexual beliefs and religion. Moreover, this review highlights how heteronormative beliefs (i.e., being straight is a preferred sexual orientation) and allonormative assumptions (i.e., all people experience sexual attraction) causes many people to adopt negative attitudes towards their asexuality and hinders the development of a positive self-concept. Findings from this study informed the research design and protocol for studies two and three and confirmed the absence of a psychometric scale measuring asexual identity development and internalisation.

Study 2

The second study 'The Identity Development and Internalisation of Asexual Orientation in Women: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', presents the experiences of five self-identified asexual women. Consistent with the themes presented in study one, the discovery of participants' asexual identities began through an awareness of themselves as different from their peers and was assisted by asexuality-specific communities. Moreover, all participants referred to the impact that heteronormativity and allonormativity has within society and how this hindered the development of a positive sense of identity and their willingness to come out. Despite the existence of a common trajectory among asexual women, there were several discrepancies across their individual accounts that were subject to their romantic orientation. For example, participants desired different types of relationships depending on their romantic identity, with aromantic women (i.e., those who do not experience romantic attraction) seeking friendships and romantic identified women (i.e., those who are romantically attracted to other people) pursuing romantic relationships. Moreover, while some aromantic women considered coming out as asexual as irrelevant, romantic identified women considered this as an important step when pursuing potential relationships. Ultimately, these findings brought us to consider the role of romantic orientation within identity development and inspired the next step in this research to compare the experiences of romantic and aromantic asexual people. Moreover, as this study focused on the identity development of asexual women, this led us to consider how this may differ on the basis of gender.

Study 3

The third study *'Asexual Identity Development and Internalisation: A Thematic Analysis'*, presents the accounts of 99 asexual people with varying romantic and gender identities.[3] Through a focus on the diverse nature of the asexual community, this research provides a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of asexual people and contributes towards the development of a robust and psychometrically sound measure. The themes presented within this study align closely with the processes of identity development outlined in studies 1 and 2. For example, discovery of the asexual orientation and identification as asexual was shown to be a common experience among participants, irrespective of their gender or romantic identity. Moreover, stigmatisation and dismissal of participants' asexual identities corresponds with the role of allonormativity and the assumption that all people should experience sexual attraction regardless of their gender or romantic identity. Similar to findings from study 2, the relationships that participants desired were dependent on their romantic identities, with romantic identified asexuals being more open to the possibility of a sexual relationship with a non-asexual partner. Moreover, gender appeared to influence reactions to participants' asexual identities, with female participants experiencing greater pressure to have sex as well as conflict surrounding their choice to not pursue a nuclear family. On the other hand, male participants described incidences where other people doubted the legitimacy of their asexuality and questioned their

masculinity as they did not experience sexual attraction.

The items

Following the completed of studies one, two and three, an initial item pool was developed that comprises of four major components or 'content dimensions' of asexual identity development and internalisation. This includes being asexual (e.g., asexuality describes me well; I am proud to be asexual), becoming asexual (e.g., I felt relieved upon discovering the asexual orientation), being in an allosexual world (e.g., allosexual people view asexuality as a phase or not a legitimate orientation) and internalisation (e.g., asexuality is alien, lacks credibility, is a choice). Questions are phrased both positively and negatively and will encompass processes surrounding identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different, discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities; and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others.

Developing the Measure: The Next Steps

Content Analysis

To ensure that questions included in the survey are a valid representation of the attitudes, experiences and beliefs of asexual people, we will carry out content analysis. To do this, we will ask people with relevant scholarly knowledge (i.e., those who have carried out research on asexuality or with LGBT people) and 'lay experts' (i.e., those who identify as asexual), to assess the relevance of questions to their content dimensions. Questions that have a low score of relevance will be deleted or rephrased to develop a more concise measure. This will be carried out prior to releasing the final survey

Distributing the Survey and Evaluating the Measure

The final stage of this research will involve distributing the asexual identity development and internalisation scale (AIDI) to a sample of approximately 600 asexual people with varying romantic and gender identities. This will be achieved through the release of an online Qualtrics survey to platforms such as AVEN, the asexuality reddit website and other similar forums. Once data has been obtained, participants' responses will be divided into two groups of approximately 300 each. Exploratory factor analysis will be carried out on the first data set to determine the variables that best describe features underlying asexual identity development and to remove any questions that do not seem relevant.[11] Confirmatory factor analysis will then be carried out on the second data set to confirm the structure of the psychometric measure and the relevance of included questions.[8] Dissemination of this research will be done at a national and local level through traditional academic routes, social media and professional networks. This will include peer-reviewed publications, research symposiums and a research blog on the AVEN website.

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Declaration of Interests

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