EXAMINING THE REPRESENTATION OF ASEXUALITY IN SELECT EXAMPLES OF VISUAL CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sexual orientation known as asexuality. Asexuality is defined as an identity that encompasses the little or lack of sexual attraction that some individuals experience. Asexuality is not understood to be a disorder, but is contextualised as an identifier that falls under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. Asexuality remains a marginalised sexual orientation: one that is often stereotyped, pathologised and stigmatised. The purpose of this study is critically to analyse the representation of asexuality in visual culture, such as in television characters and on social media platforms.

This study offers a sex-critical (Downing 2013b) reading of asexuality. By means of a sex-critical reading, the representations of asexuality are critiqued and analysed using queer theory and asexual theory. In this study I investigate a sample of television series, namely *Shortland Street* (Hollings, De Nave & Daniel 1992-)*, Faking It* (Goodman & Wolov 2014-2016)*, The March Family Letters* (Shelson 2014-2015)*, Sex Education* (Nunn 2019-)*, Euphoria* (Levinson 2019-) and *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020). The television representations of asexuality are semiotically analysed by looking at both the visual characterisation and storylines of these characters. Further, these television representations are examined according to asexual theory to critique heteronormative perceptions of asexuality. In addition, this study examines alternative depictions of asexuality that differ from stereotyped representations. The analyses of these television characters provide insight into how asexuality is presented in contemporary media. Through the exploration of asexuality's heterogeneity, this study disallows a fixed one-dimensional characterisation of asexuality. I maintain that through a large assortment of representations of asexuality, an increased visibility of asexuality on the small screen allows for the understanding and acceptance of asexuality as a unique sexual orientation.
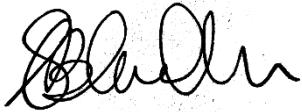
In this study I also conduct a comprehensive examination of user-generated representations of asexuality that are found on social media platforms. This study investigates visual representations of asexuality found on Twitter and Instagram, namely Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit on Twitter and Instagram) Venus Envy (on Twitter @VenusEnvyDrag and @venusenvydrag on Instagram), Michelle Lin (on @LGBT's Instagram page) and Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram). By allowing users to form communities, visualise their asexual experience and create digital representations of asexuality, social media platforms offer asexual individuals the unique opportunity to curate their online representations

according to their self-identified asexual identities. In addition, this study identifies and examines three recurrent tropes that are reiterated through the online self-representations of asexuality. I argue that these self-representations of asexuality, allow for a more diverse archive of representations of asexuality. Through social media platforms, asexual individuals are able to empower themselves through the establishment of their own personalised representations of asexuality. This enables individuals to find supportive communities, all the while validating their own asexual identities. These user-generated representations explore asexuality's heterogeneity and seek to give insight into how the public, the asexual community as well as the LGBTQIA+ community perceive asexuality. Thus, these online representations of asexuality establish asexuality as a valid sexual orientation, one that exists amongst heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ orientations.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

Student Number: 17199884

I hereby declare that *Examining the representation of asexuality in select examples of visual culture* is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicted and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Stirling Julienne Blunden

15 November 2023

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To quote Charles Dickens' (1906:1) profound words, my Master's journey "was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity": however, I would not have it any other way. I am eternally grateful to have been gifted with the opportunity to conduct such self-fulfilling work. As I have sat down and laid myself bare through my extensive exploration into asexuality, I have come to find my work to be rather therapeutic and self-affirming. I can only hope that my work reaches those who are in need of personal validation, regardless of their asexual or non-asexual identification. The invaluable insights from asexuality offer profound understandings that benefit not only asexuals, but also provide non-asexuals with a broader perspective on diverse expressions of human sexuality.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the University of Pretoria, and more specifically, the School of the Arts. I am grateful for all of the overwhelming support and endless inspiration I have received from my fellow peers.

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my anxieties. To Riley, you have been a blessing throughout my final year. Thank you for your friendship and your assistance.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background and Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexuality as "a central aspect of being human throughout life" that encompasses "sex, gender identity, sexual orientation and intimacy". WHO further states that sexuality is experienced through desires, attitudes and roles in relationships, but notes that sexuality can have all of these attributes, even if they are not always experienced or expressed (WHO 2010). According to this definition, one's sexuality may be experienced differently compared to others, but sexuality remains at the core of the human being. Although this may seem inclusive of many LGBTQIA+ identities,[1] WHO's definition excludes asexuality.

Asexuality is defined as a term used for those who experience little, lack or no sexual attraction (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:713,715). Asexuality is at odds with the dominant heteronormative Western society. Judith Butler (2011:58) describes the construction of heteronormativity as "the normative phantasm of compulsory heterosexuality." Heterosexuality remains relatively unquestioned and is seen as the universal default that is preferred and accepted in society (Sullivan 2003:49; Meyer 2017:333). This heteronormative 'culture of sex' prioritises and privileges heterosexual sexual activity and sexual attraction, to the detriment of other ways of relating (Carrigan 2011:474; DeLuzio Chasin 2011:718; Gupta 2017:992; Rothblum, Heimann & Carpenter 2019:83). In terms of academic findings, there are debates about whether asexuality is a sexual orientation, a sexual dysfunction disorder, a community and a unique sexual orientation (Bogaert 2006:243; Brotto & Yule 2017:621; DeLuzio Chasin 2017:632; Scherrer 2008:623; Van Houdenhove, Enzlin & Gijs 2017:649; Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka 2017:50). In terms of a sexual orientation, asexuality is a complex spectrum made up of individuals who self-identify as asexual. Many of these self-identified asexuals categorise

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[1] The LGBTQIA+ acronym has different meanings and terms throughout the community. According to the University of Illinois Springfield (2020), LGBTQIA+ is a common acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Allies. OutRight Action (2019) International also state that the "+" acknowledges that there are non-cisgender (people who do not identify with their assigned gender at birth) and non-straight identities that are not included but fall under the LGBTQIA+ acronym.

asexuality as a unique sexual orientation that can co-exist and overlap with LGBTQIA+ identities (DeLuzio Chasin 2017:632; Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:650).

According to Son Vivienne (2017:126), the self-representation of traditionally stigmatised groups of people has the potential to challenge the normative representations of beauty, gender and sexuality. The media has a powerful impact on how asexual identities are accepted in society. Vincent Youngbauer and Joseph Jones (2018:45-53) state that the media's messages impact people's beliefs, whether portraying accurate or stereotyped representations of LGBTQIA+ identities or not. If the media limits representations of asexual characters or portrays asexual individuals negatively, those who consume media mythologise asexuals according to their lack of representation or stereotyped characteristics (Bond 2015:38-40). Therefore, it is important to depathologise and destigmatise asexuality. One way that this can be done is by presenting a diverse spectrum of representations of asexuality.

By means of a sex-critical reading of asexuality, this study investigates various representations of asexuality found in visual culture. Television series, namely *Shortland Street* (Hollings *et al* 1992-)*, Faking It* (Goodman & Wolov 2014-2016)*, The March Family Letters* (Shelson 2014-2015)*, Sex Education* (Nunn 2019-)*, Euphoria* (Levinson 2019-) and *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020) will be explored in this study. In addition, this study examines user-generated representations of asexuality that are found on social media platforms. This study investigates visual representations of asexuality found on Twitter and Instagram, namely Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit on Twitter and Instagram) Venus Envy (on Twitter @VenusEnvyDrag and @venusenvydrag on Instagram), Michelle Lin (on @LGBT's Instagram page) and Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram).

1.2   Aims of Study

I aim to analyse representations of asexuality in visual culture, namely from television, Twitter and Instagram. This study makes use of a sex-critical reading, which entails using a queer theoretical framework and asexual discourses to explore the potential positive and negative meanings, myths and tropes of a given representation.

1.3   Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three main themes, namely the exclusion of asexuality in the LGBTQIA+ community, asexual representations in television characters, and asexual representations on social media platforms.

1.3.1   *The exclusion of asexuality in the LGBTQIA+ community*

LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that is associated with marginalised sexual orientations, genders and identities. The identities that are included in the LGBTQIA+ acronym are often described as minority groups that distance themselves from the privileging of sexual reproduction as the main purpose of sexuality (Carroll 2019:4). As an identifier, asexuality falls within the LGBTQIA+ acronym, however, asexuality as a queer identity is often left out of the typical, mainstream understanding of LGBTQIA+ (Miles 2019:3). As a minority orientation that is often misunderstood as a non-sexual orientation, asexuality is often referred to as the 'invisible orientation'. The A in LGBTQIA+ is often argued to stand for allies and not for asexual-identified people or for asexuality (Carroll 2019:3; Mollett & Lackman 2018:625; Teut 2019:95). LGBTQIA+ allies refer to individuals who provide support to those that identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Pinto 2014:331). Allies can identify within or outside of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Allies are educated about LGBTQIA+ matters and advocate for destigmatisation and equality for marginalised identities. Although allies are important for the destigmatisation and legitimisation of LGBTQIA+ identities (Pinto 2014:331), in some cases both heterosexual and queer (LGBTQIA+) spaces are more accepting of non-LGBTQIA+ as allies, even accepting asexual individuals into these communities as allies rather than as LGBTQIA+ members. A Reddit[2] post onto the subreddit r/lgbt (Figure 1) that enquires about the A in the LGBTQIA+ acronym on demonstrates this confusion.
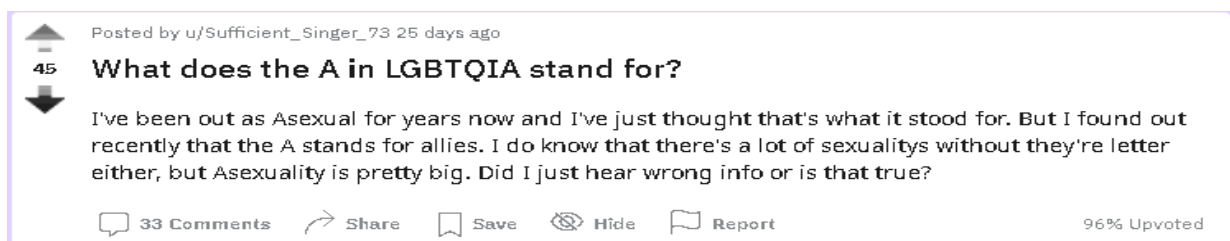
Figure 1: Reddit post by u/Sufficient_Singer_73, posted on the subreddit r/lgbt on the 15th of September 2021. Screenshot by author.

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[2] Reddit is a social network that has "over 100,000 online communities (forums where members post and comment) dedicated to specific topics" (Reddit 2023).

Although the Reddit post is an informal resource, this post is valuable as it highlights the opinions of those within the asexual community. This sentiment demonstrates the unfixed meaning for the A within the LGBTQIA+ acronym. However, it should be noted that this is not to say that allies are unimportant to LGBTQIA+ communities; allies assist with acceptance and understanding toward minority sexual and gender identities, which is crucial for the poorly misunderstood, often unrecognised asexual community (Pinto 2014:331,336).

Karen Cuthbert (2017:241) defines asexuality to "denote low scores and measures of both homosexuality and heterosexuality", describing asexuality as a "repressed subset of homosexuality". As a non-sexual orientation, asexuality is often spoken about through reiterated, pervasive stereotypes: asexuals are assumed to have a fixed asexual identity, and all asexuals are generalised as "aromatic, female, afraid of sex, highly religious, disabled, victims of sexual trauma, or [are] making a conscious decision to be asexual" (Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka 2014a:1). According to asexual empirical case studies (Hoffarth, Drolet, Hodson & Hafer 2016; MacInnis & Hodson 2012), anti-asexual prejudice has been found amongst those who do not identify under the asexual spectrum.

Cara MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2012) conducted two studies, using undergraduate university students and community samples (284 heterosexual participants), to examine how negatively those who do not desire sexual activity are viewed by heterosexuals (MacInnis & Hodson 2012:725). In Study 1, they questioned heterosexual participants about their views on heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality, and in Study 2 they questioned heterosexual participants on their views surrounding heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality and sapiosexuality.[3] Study 1 found that participants attributed significantly lower uniquely human traits, human nature traits, uniquely human emotions and human nature emotions to asexuals, with asexuals being perceived as being the "least human", "machine-like" and "animalistic" of all sexual minority groups (MacInnis & Hodson 2012:731-732). In Study 2, findings showed that attitudes toward asexuals were notably more negative than attitudes reported toward sapiosexuals. MacInnis and Hodson (2012:737-738) therefore

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[3] Sapiosexuality is described as a sexual minority orientation that consists of individuals that are sexually attracted to the human mind, finding intelligence "to be the most arousing quality of their sexual partners" (MacInnis & Hodson 2012:735).

conclude that sapiosexuality is more accepted by heterosexuals, despite being a more unfamiliar sexual minority.

According to Pádraig MacNeela and Aisling Murphy (2015:799), "socially, asexuality attracted denial and resistance due to incompatibility with heteronormative societal expectations". Mark Hoffarth, Caroline Drolet, Gordon Hodson and Carolyn Hafer (2016) conducted a study using 339 heterosexual American participants, with the goal of developing "a multi-item measure of anti-asexual bias" to understand the differences associated with an anti-asexual bias (Hoffarth *et al* 2016:91). Their study found that heterosexual participants displayed discriminant prejudice toward asexuality: asexuals are perceived as threatening traditional gender norms, and the self-acceptance of one's asexual identity may pose a threat to those who are unaware of asexuality. In this sense, asexuality may threaten the value that sexual relationships are given in a heteronormative society (Hoffarth *et al* 2016:97). This is disheartening for self-identified asexuals as they have complex identities which overlap with other identities in the LGBTQIA+ community, and they often face alienation from others as a result of the stigmatisation and the invisibility of non-sexuality in LGBTQIA+ spaces (Gupta 2017:991). In a study looking at American LGBT members in comparison to asexual participants, Esther Rothblum, Evan Krueger, Krystal Kittle and Ilan Meyer (2020:757) found that their asexual respondents reported feeling more stigmatisation and discrimination in their everyday lives compared to those that did not identify under the asexual umbrella.

Similar to LGBTQIA+ identities, asexuality has been pathologised within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) through the promotion of a required normal or "healthy" sexual functioning in humans (Carroll 2019:10). Medical practitioners often dismiss asexuality as a physical or psychological disorder (Alcaire 2021; Carroll 2019:20; Thorpe & Arbeau 2020:307). This pathologisation can ironically lead to heightened stress and discomfort, causing potential physical or psychological issues for those who feel as if their asexual identity is being dismissed (Bulmer & Izuma 2018:962; Fraser, Wilson, Garisch, Robinson, Brocklesby, Kingi, O'Connell & Russell 2018).

Historically, the LGBTQIA+ community, much like the asexual community, has also faced medical discrimination and pathologisation by mental health and medical health practitioners (Flanagan 2020:1631). According to Tovah Cowan and André LeBlanc (2018:32-37), as early as the late 1990s, medical professionals and scientists were searching for the "gay gene". Rita

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Alcaire (2021:2) states that, while homosexuality and transgender identities were considered to be mental illnesses, asexuality has been medicalised as a symptom of disorders such as Hyperactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). Aside from medical stigmatisation, LGBTQIA+ and asexual groups also face similar types of societal discrimination. Eric Peterson (2009:14) states that many minority group members are constantly forced to "come out" in their everyday life, further stating that many of these individuals fearfully believe that by being "'outed' at the wrong time could cost them their jobs, their family, even their physical safety." It would seem that the inclusion of asexuality into the LGBTQIA+ community could allow for the depathologisation of asexuality and provide visibility for asexuality as a unique sexual orientation, allowing more people to explore an asexual identity.

There remains a widespread misconception that the human experience revolves around sex, sexual attraction and sexual desire (Carroll 2019:4). In order to identify as asexual, one has to be introduced to the asexual spectrum, understand that not experiencing sex the same ways that it is produced through heteronormativity is not an abnormality, and go through a process of self-clarification as a self-identified asexual (Miller 2015:38). The self-identification of asexuals is important as it allows asexuality to be understood as a sexual orientation. According to Alcaire (2021:3), it is important to remember that "asexuality is very much part of the broader conversation about how gender and sexual diversity is challenged and disputed in Western society". As a sexual orientation, asexuality is then able to overlap with the LGBTQIA+ community, allowing better understandings of gender and sexual identities that exist amongst humankind.

- Self-identification

According to Jennie Munday (2006:91), the concept of identity is a complex and multifaceted issue. She states that "identity is not an autonomous object or a property possessed by individuals, but rather [is understood as a] process through which social actors come to recognize themselves, and be recognized by others" (Munday 2006:91). Therefore, identity describes the way people understand themselves and identities are used to explain oneself to others (Yule *et al* 2017:52). Stuart Hall (1996:2) argues that identities are constructed through common, shared characteristics. He states that modern identities are understood as "fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and monogamistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall 1996:4). MacNeela and Murphy

(2015:801) argue that the process of identification is associated with a plethora of beliefs, behavioural expectations and lifestyles that are played out in everyday life. Identities are constantly influenced by history, language and culture, and therefore identities are always changing and transforming. On identities, Cuthbert (2017:247) argues that in order to establish one's own identifiers, it is important to establish oneself through difference: this is done by seeking out collective identity groups that have similar desirable characteristics, all the while establishing boundaries around a collective Othered identity that is oppositional to one's preferred identity characteristics. As Butler (2011:75) maintains, "here it should become clear that a radical refusal to identify with a given position suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place." Identification is then understood to comprise multiple personalised identifiers, such as one's sexuality and who they are and are not romantically interested in. Identity is important in forming relationships (Haynes 2013:376). By coming across examples of minority sexual identities, individuals are able to take on new identities or transform their own sets of identifiers. Munday (2006:91) names these "exposure" identities as "expressive identities"; identities that are transformed and shaped "within a particular group or movement but which then influence all aspects of how individuals choose to live their lives".

According to Stacy Anne Pinto (2014:335), "sexuality can be understood as existing on a continuum, or a range of identities that differ from one another, but exist between distinct poles/possibilities, with sexual on one end and asexual on the other". Often described as a non-sexual orientation, one that challenges the essentialist nature of human sexuality (Robbins, Gaff Low & Query 2016:752), asexuality is often hard to identify: this is because "sexuality is typically measured using criterion of behavior, attraction and identity that do not translate well for asexualities" (Carroll 2019:5-6). Asexuality therefore creates "a novel identity category," which forms "part of a normal spectrum of healthy human sexuality" (Carroll 2019:11). Ellen van Houdenhove and Luk Gijs (2015:263-268) state that the asexual self-identification process often begins once one experiences inter-personal exclusion from their peers, often during their adolescence. This sense of exclusion revolves around the forming of one's sexual desire and sexual attraction. These individuals then start a process of self-questioning as they work to make sense of their apparent sexual difference. Van Houdenhove and Gijs (2015) studied nine asexual women about their experiences with their asexual identities, sexualities and relationships. They found that the majority of their participants felt different compared to their

non-asexual/ allosexual[4] peers, with four of the participants noticing this difference while being adolescents (Van Houdenhove & Gijs 2015:268). These participants stated that they always felt different but could never explain the extent of their difference. They noted that they would prioritise other things in their life compared to their peers who would be exploring their sexual attractions (Van Houdenhove & Gijs 2015:268). This is replicated in a case study researching the "coming out" narratives of 196 self-identified asexual individuals, conducted by Nicolette Robbins, Kathryn Graff Low and Anna Query (2016). They produce a six-stage identity formation module based on their research. They speak briefly about their participants' experiences with self-questioning in their adolescence and the ways in which some participants would initially pathologise their lack of sexual feelings, attractions, and expressions. This would lead to internal confusion, a sense of difference and in some cases, feelings of being "broken" (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:472; Robbins *et al* 2016:757-759). Megan Carroll (2019:12-13) maintains that asexuals receive the same heteronormative messages that the rest of society receives, and therefore they come to find that they do not fit into heteronormativity. It is only after coming across the asexual spectrum or an asexual community that they may begin to incorporate asexuality into their identification.

CJ DeLuzio Chasin (2011:471) supports these findings, maintaining that feelings of being different in adolescents' lives lead to self-questioning, allowing for self-clarification and self-identification with asexuality once coming into contact with the asexual lexicon. The 2019 Asexual Community Survey Summary Report (Weis, Hermann, Bauer, Miller, Baba, Van der Biezen, Campos, Smiga, Tomaskovic-Moore, Trieu, Walfrand & Ziebert 2021:38) found that on average, asexual respondents began identifying with their asexual, sexual or romantic identity around the age of 19 and first 'came out' to someone around one year later. Maria Bulmer and Keise Izuma (2018:962) state that coming to an asexual identity has been described as being relieving, allowing asexual individuals to feel comforted and validated in their feelings towards personal sexual attractions. Lori Brotto, Gail Knudson, Jess Inskip, Katherine Rhodes and Yvonne Erskine (2010) conducted a case study which explored the personal experiences of 187 self-identified asexuals. They found that a majority of participants did not feel distressed by their asexual orientation (Brotto *et al* 2010:603). Through the adoption of an asexual identification, one is able to experience self-clarification and self-acceptance (Brotto *et al*

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[4] Allosexual is a term frequently used amongst those in the asexual community to describe non asexual individuals, or in contrast to asexual people (Alcaire 2021:2; Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:164).

2010:610; Carroll 2019:12,19). Robbins *et al* (2016:752) found that many asexual respondents found that their asexual identity was incredibly affirming to their identification.

Asexuality lacks a stable definition, and it should be noted that scholars and those who come across asexuality should refrain from describing the "gold star" asexual or enforcing that there is an ideal asexual identity. Cuthbert (2017:249) describes the "gold star" asexual as someone who identifies with the sex they are assigned with at birth, has no history of abuse, has always felt asexual and is a virgin. On a forum posted on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)[5] in 2017, asexual-identified individuals discussed how they felt about the concept of the "gold star" asexual (AVEN 2017a). All sixteen respondents disapproved of this title, stating that it made sexuality seem like a competition, that it split the asexual community into elites versus Others, and that it implied that "gold star" asexuals were 'purer' in comparison to the rest of the asexual community.

According to Carroll (2019:9), asexual communities primarily manifest in online spaces. These communities allow a diverse spectrum of asexual individuals and identities to co-exist. MacInnis and Hodson (2012:726) state that, through the Internet, minority sexual groups are granted "visibility and social recognition". Robbins *et al* (2016:756) argue that the Internet helps inform questioning individuals about asexuality, and some asexuals utilise internet sites such as Facebook to "come out" by either forwarding an asexual website to their loved ones or posting about their asexual identity on their personal profiles. Communities such as AVEN provide information about asexuality and the common lack of sexual attraction that asexuals report experiencing. Such a community has the ability to lead potential asexuals to a self-identified asexual identity. AVEN serves as a site for the organisation of asexual lexicons, which are of great importance for minority sexualities (Kenney 2020:1). AVEN provides a site for initial introduction and interpersonal communication amongst many self-identified asexuals

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[5] AVEN is a website (www.asexuality.org) created by David Jay in 2001. The website provides the definition of an asexual person as "a person who does not experience sexual attraction and is not drawn to anyone sexually and does not have the desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way" (AVEN 2020). AVEN was established as a way to create public acceptance and discussions of asexuality, all the while helping facilitate the growth of an asexual community. AVEN is the largest asexual community and creates a safe space for those who identify as asexual, as well as those who are self-questioning. On AVEN's website, there is information about attraction, arousal, relationships, identity as well as a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section for potential asexuals, non-asexuals, partners of asexual identified people, and for friends and families of asexual people. AVEN creates visibility through pamphlets, visibility projects, workshops, creating local meetups and speaking to the press. AVEN also has a wide variety of forums which allow community members to engage with each other and discuss their own asexual identity. Forums include 'coming out' stories, discussions about asexuality, announcements about asexuality and the media, questions about identity as well as planning meetups (AVEN 2020).

and allows asexuality to become more accessible to a wider range of people who might search the Internet for answers for their feelings or internal confusions. These online communities bring together individuals with similar life experiences, creating a space for individuals to validate themselves and their feelings (Cowan & LeBlanc 2018:39; Lagerkvist 2014:206). This can be described as a transitional existential liminal period, which is a state in which individuals move away from one status but have not yet moved onto the next status (Lugosi 2007:166). Peter Lugosi (2007:167) states that notions of individualism are abandoned during this stage and are "replaced by a sense of collective being." Through the state of liminality, communities such as AVEN assist in a transitional phase for many asexuals: they enter this phase of their lives being confused and feeling Othered, and exit feeling validated by self-identifying as asexual. Through this process unity is established, and individuals transcend differences in roles, statuses, races and class. They experience a sense of existential *communitas* which refers to being united under a common experience. It is often through this sense of *communitas* that sexual minority individuals experience a great sense of self-acceptance (Lugosi 2007:166). According to Carroll (2019:4), "AVEN has played an important role in de-stigmatizing asexuality, and their message boards serve as the birth place of the asexual community by creating a hub for online communication between asexuals".

Florencia Catri (2021:1533) states that "one of the most commonly used criteria to recruit asexual participants for research is self-identification". Asexual research has a bias towards self-identified asexuals (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:713-720) and Morag Yule, Lori Brotto and Boris Gorzalka (2014a:2) contend that there is "very little known about the experiences of individuals who lack sexual attraction, but have yet to 'come out' and adopt the label of 'asexual'". Some people experience a lack of sexual attraction but do not identify as asexual. This may be due to not being educated about asexuality or accepting oneself without the need to adopt an asexual identity. Catri (2021:1532) also notes that an asexual identity does "not necessarily indicate that an individual lacks sexual attraction". Jessica Hille, Megan Simmons and Stephanie Sanders (2020:813) argue that it has been established that self-identified sexual orientation labels are "not necessarily strong predicators of sexual behavior histories". In other words, there are no unique physical behaviours that are linked to self-identified asexuality. However, Brittney Miles (2019:3) states that asexuality prioritises cis[6]gendered, hetero- or

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[6] Cisgender is a gender identity that describes a person who identifies with the sex they were assigned to at birth.

aromantic, white, middle-class people and states that "these identities are more legible than asexuality in their hegemonic navigation of power structures in society". These so-called "gold star" asexuals accept their asexuality as a "badge that is worn" while there are "certain people and bodies that have asexuality forcefully pinned onto them" (Cuthbert 2017:249-251).[7]

It should be emphasised that asexuality is an umbrella term used to describe a spectrum of asexual identities that differ between individuals, and is fluid with regards to sexual attraction and romantic attraction (Brotto *et al* 2010:609; Carrigan 2011:469-470; Carroll 2019:3; DeLuzio Chasin 2011:714; DeLuzio Chasin 2017:632; Mollet & Lackman 2018:624; Scherrer 2008:633; Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:649). Thom Winter-Gray and Nikki Hayfield (2021:164) argue that defining asexuality as a complete lack of sexual attraction negatively implies that asexual-identified people are "lacking", and asexuality is therefore defined as a "deficit identity".

The feeling of being different is common amongst those who come to identifying as asexual: however, sexuality-related variables have also been found to be associated with self-identified asexuals. Hillary Bush, Lindsey Williams and Eva Mendes (2021:725) state that asexuality is "often described as a stable pattern of non-experiencing sexual desire for other people". They state that for asexuals who do not partake in sexual behaviours, their lack of sexual experience is not solely due to a lack of a sexual partner, and in a similar sense, their lack of sexual desire is not associated with significant distress. Self-identifying as asexual creates self-meaning for individuals, which further influences the ways they live their lives.

Lorca Sloan (2015:548) states that asexuals have diverse ranges of sex and sexual activities, and to contradict pervasive stereotypes, despite experiencing little or a lack of sexual attraction, not all asexuals abstain from sex. Carroll (2019:5) contends that for some asexuals, their lack of interest in sex and sexual behaviour is not necessarily connected to their lack of sexual attraction (Lund & Johnson 2015:124). As an identity, asexuality encompasses a variety of asexual experiences, meaning that asexual identities are "unfixed, evolving and highly personal" (Carroll 2019:16). However, self-identified asexual individuals will only come to their asexual identity through a process of self-questioning if they suspect that they have a

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[7] Asexuality is often forcibly pinned onto Asian men, elders and people with disabilities.

difference in, or lack of sexual attraction compared to those around them.[8] With this being said, it is important to bear in mind that there are asexuals who are comfortable with sexual behaviours and actively seek them out. Catri (2021:964) notes that many asexuals desire "emotional closeness and companionship," and some enjoy "physically intimate activities such as kissing and cuddling, though they did not interpret these to be sexual". Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2021:163,165) maintain that some asexual people incorporate sensual and sexual activities into their relationship, with some asexuals needing a form of sexual release[9] (Carroll 2019:180). Vares (2018:524) states that for some asexuals, 'sex' includes "a range of sexual practices such as oral sex and touching the genitalia and breasts". It should also be noted that within the asexual spectrum, those who engage in sexual behaviours report lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Bush *et al* 2021:730).

Many scholars note that sexual behaviour does not play a part in defining one's asexual identity (Bush *et al* 2021:725; Carroll 2019:5). There are different degrees to which an asexual identity is adopted by self-identified asexuals: some strongly identify with asexuality, while others see their asexuality as an unfolding process which is fluid (MacNeela & Murphy 2015:805). Tiina Vares (2018:521) states that many asexuals may engage in sexual activities as a result of "societal expectations and pressures, the desire to 'pass' as sexual, or 'gifting' sex for the good of the relationship". Carroll (2019:17) states that asexuals who are sexually active often described their reasons for having sex as a "sacrifice", that sex is "a way of showing love for their partner, or something that seemed like a normal cause for the relationship". Catri (2021:963-964) reiterates the sentiment that some asexuals participate in sexual activities "due to feeling pressured to engage in sex, or to please a partner". She states that some of these asexuals tend to focus on something else when they are engaging in sexual activities. These asexuals often report that they do not feel closer to their sexual partners as a result of participating in sexual relations (Carroll 2019:17). It is also noteworthy that, according to Cuthbert (2019:861), some asexuals are "so aware of themselves as objects of desire that they deliberately cultivate a more gender neutral embodiment in order to shield themselves from the violence of objectification". Kristin Scherrer (2009:65-66) states that it is often difficult for

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[8] See Gupta 2019; MacInnis & Hodson 2012; MacNeela & Murphy 2015; Brotto *et al* 2010; Pinto 2014; Cuthbert 2017; Lund & Johnson 2015; Miller 2015; Milligan & Neufeldt 2001; Alcaire 2021; Vares 2018; Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka 2014b; Bush *et al* 2021; Carroll 2019; Thorpe & Arbeau 2020; Rothblum *et al* 2020; Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021; Catri 2021; Bulmer & Izuma 2018; Van Houdenhove & Gijs 2015; Cowan & LeBlanc 2018; Robbins *et al* 2016; Antonsen, Zdaniuk, Yule & Brotto 2020; Hille *et al* 2020; DeLuzio Chasin 2011; Carrigan 2011; Scherrer 2008; DeLuzio Chasin 2017; Van Houdenhove, Enzlin & Gijs 2017; Mollet & Lackman 2018.
[9] Sexual activity depends on the sexual needs and specific sexual drive of each asexual individual.

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others, including non-asexual partners, to perceive a relationship without sex, "perhaps because of their perceived interrelatedness of sex and intimacy". Asexuals in relationships with non-asexual partners face interpersonal challenges as they may struggle to navigate a relationship that implicitly revolves around a lack of sexual attraction and sexual desire. Scherrer (2009:64) notes that instead of sex being a defining characteristic of these relationships, asexuals describe other aspects of their relationship as being fundamental, such as "mutual acknowledgement, trust, intellectual engagement, reliability and support".

Emily Lund and Bayley Johnson (2015:125) argue that "most self-identified asexual people do not report feeling distressed as a result of their lack of sexual desire or attraction". Hoffarth *et al* (2016:97) found that "asexuals who are happy with their life may pose a threat for the assumption that sexual relationships are critical for happiness". Through the affirmation felt amongst self-identified asexuals, and through allyship amongst non-asexuals, asexuality is destigmatised, validated and in turn accepted as a unique sexual orientation.

- A unique sexual orientation

Morag Yule, Lori Brotto and Boris Gorzalka (2017:51) define sexual orientation as an "internal mechanism that directs a person's sexual interest toward men, women, both," or those who do not identify with male or female, while Ellen van Houdenhove, Paul Enzlin and Luk Gijs (2017:649) define sexual orientation as a multidimensional construct that includes sexual attraction, sexual identity and sexual behaviour. Anthony Bogaert (2006:244) states that sexual orientation relates to the individual's subjective sexual attraction to the sex of others and Paz Galupo, Renae Mitchell and Kyle Davis (2018:1241) and Kathryn Haynes (2013:376) all argue that sexual orientation and sexuality encompass desire, sexual practice, identity, sexual acts, sexual behaviours and sexual attraction. MacInnis and Hodson maintain that sexuality[10] has been linked to nearly all aspects of human social life (MacInnis & Hodson 2012:729) and there remains a widespread assumption that all humans experience sexual attraction and sexual desire (Carroll 2019:4,11). In hetero- and queer sexual orientations, sexual agency remains emphasised, and sexual fluidity, identity evolution and personalised sexual orientation identifiers are acknowledged and accepted by some groups of people, namely in LGBTQIA+ spaces and in academia. Scherrer (2008:621,636) states that sexual identifiers are closely linked with "gender of object choice", and as a social construct, sexuality and its ties with gender is

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[10] Pinto (2014:333) defines sexuality as an individual's sexual practices and desires.

considered "an important aspect of selfhood". Sexuality, as well as gender, are socially determined constructs that are "always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms" (Vance 2018:139). Through the reiteration of sexuality norms across all aspects of society, a 'sexual assumption' is formed: this assumes sex to be a prerequisite of human life and plays a vital part in one's sexual orientation. This 'sexual assumption' promotes and prioritises compulsory sexuality, which in turn privileges heterosexuality as the superior form of sexuality. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004:487) argue that norms surrounding sexuality and gender exist within a "complex array of social relations". A norm operates within social practices, creating a standard of normalisation that leads to heteronormativity, gender binarisation and Othering. These norms are constructed through "historically specific developments and practices" (Hall 1996:4) which function by regulating the spectrum of identities that are accepted in Western societies. Ela Przybylo (2019:5) contends that "systems of sexuality[11] have been developed to categorize people into sexual personas" and that these systems "historically functioned as systems of colonial imposition underwritten by desires to keep heterosexuality tethered to whiteness, normality and ability". These norms assist in maintaining the power that heteronormativity yields, further contributing to "amatonormativity" which refers to the organisation of human relations according to a "hierarchy that prioritizes sexual and romantic couples" and the relating between humans (Przybylo 2019:5). Przybylo (2011:446) introduces the term "sexusociety", which "acknowledges the central roles sexuality and sex play in our society and in our lives". In a postmodern heteronormative sexusociety, sexuality is no longer defined by "love" nor sexual reproduction motives, but rather, eroticism for pleasure (Carroll 2019:4).

By these definitions, asexuality is unable to be understood as a sexual orientation and is often referred to as a lack of a sexual orientation or an invisible orientation (Cuthbert 2019:842; Flanagan & Peters 2020:1638; Galupo *et al* 2018:1247). However, and importantly, it should be noted that Pinto (2014:335) states that "sexuality can be understood as existing on a continuum, or a range of identities that slightly differ from one another, but exist between distinct poles/ possibilities, with sexual on one end and asexual on the other". The concept of sexuality has been shifting to accommodate a wider range of perspectives (Carroll 2019:9). Although stereotypically labelled as a nonsexual group (Mollet & Lackman 2018:626), heterogeneity is at the core of asexuality. Asexuality as a spectrum orientation allows for a

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[11] These dominant systems also include gender.

multitude of experiences (Przybylo 2019:43), suggesting that asexuality presents divergent views of human life. As Mark Carrigan (2011:476) states, asexuality welcomes "a range of attitudes and orientations toward sex" and romance, all the while redefining traditional notions surrounding sexual behaviours and human relationships (Scherrer 2008:629). In this sense, adopting an essentialist way of thinking about asexuality may limit the broad experiences of those who identify on the asexual spectrum.

Van Houdenhove *et al* (2017:649) acknowledge that researchers have considered romantic attraction and affection to be included as markers of sexual orientations, and due to the spectrum of asexual identities, asexuality therefore has the potential to be a sexual orientation. Emily Lund, Katie Thomas, Christina Sias and April Bradley (2016:225) are careful to note that one should see romantic attraction as distinct from the construction of sexual orientation, and this is vital when looking at asexuality as a unique sexual orientation. Jo Teut (2019:95) notes that there are at least five different types of attraction: sexual, sensual, romantic, platonic and aesthetic. Self-identified asexuals generally incorporate their romantic attraction as part of their overall asexual sexual orientation. This includes romantic orientations such as heteroromantic,[12] homoromantic,[13] biromantic,[14] panromantic[15] and aromantic.[16]

Those who identify as asexual often explore other attractions such as aesthetic attraction[17] and sensual attraction[18] (Przybylo 2019:5). Some asexuals form relationships that are not based on sexual attraction (Gupta 2017:1001) while other asexuals are sex-positive and are willing to have sex in certain contexts (Carrigan 2011:469). In this sense, asexuals may couple up with non-asexuals, or with another asexual partner, or they may have multiple partners that identify as asexual and/or as non-asexual. They may also couple with a partner(s) but might not label their relationship as a romantic relationship. The spectrum of asexuality does not exclude those who participate in 'sexual' activities, such as masturbation, and it is crucial to understand that asexual individuals are fluid in their sexual experiences with respect to their decision to participate in sexual activities. Scherrer (2008:628-629) states that many asexual individuals have their own interpretations of sexual acts and non-sexual acts. Brotto *et al* (2010:604) found

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[12] Hetero-romance refers to experiencing romantic attraction to someone of the opposite sex.
[13] Homo-romance refers to experiencing romantic attraction to someone of the same sex.
[14] Bi-romance refers to experiencing romantic attraction to both males and females.
[15] Pan-romance refers to experiencing romantic attraction without a preference for sex and gender identities.
[16] Aromance refers to experiencing no romantic attraction to any sex or gender identities.
[17] Aesthetic attraction is an attraction to someone's appearance.
[18] The desire to have physical, non-sexual contact with someone, such as hand holding refers to sensual attraction.

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that the majority of their asexual informants had participated in masturbation in the past. In an interview with thirteen self-identified romantic asexuals, Vares (2018:524) found that most participants described sex to include a range of sexual practices such as "oral sex and touching the genitalia and breasts". Brotto *et al* (2010:607) found that in their case study of 187 self-identified asexuals, 25% engaged in intercourse despite not experiencing sexual attraction. Many asexual individuals mentioned that they participated in sexual activities to make their partner(s) happy, to procreate, to release tension, to "pass" as sexual, to benefit their relationships, and some mentioned partaking in sex due to social pressure (Bulmer & Izuma 2018:963; Catri 2021:1535; Lund & Johnson 2015:124; Vares 2018:521; Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:172).

Sloan (2015) conducted a study of fifteen asexual individuals who participate in Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism (BDSM). Sloan found that asexuals varied in their responses to sex, from revulsion to indifference, and BDSM provided them with a "reliable space" where they could set physical boundaries while engaging in consensual sexual activities that brought pleasure to themselves and their partner(s). Like Sloan, Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2021) looked at asexual individuals and how they navigate their asexual identity while experiencing kinks[19] and fetishes.[20] They discovered that asexual individuals do experience kinks and fetishes, although they were less likely to experience sexual fantasies that included other individuals (Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:172). It should be noted that some theorists refer to this as autochorissexualism,[21] an identity-less attraction or the lack of one's identity during fantasies (Bogaert 2012:1513; Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:171; Yule *et al* 2014b:93).

Therefore, categorising asexuality as a unique sexual orientation refers to asexuality as a "social, biological, agentic" (Miles 2019:3) orientation, and does not simply refer to an orientation taken on by individuals who do not have sex. Van Houdenhove *et a*l (2017:650) and DeLuzio Chasin (2017:632) both categorise asexuality as a unique sexual orientation due to the vast diversity of asexual identities that overlap with other sexual orientations. Establishing asexuality as a unique sexual orientation therefore allows asexuality to function

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[19] Kink refers to a sexual activity that is considered to be "outside the norm" (Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:165).
[20] A fetish is defined as an "object, body part, or behaviour that triggers sexual responsiveness in an individual" (Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:165).
[21] Autochorissexuality falls under the asexuality spectrum.

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as an opposition to non-asexuality in other sexual orientations. These theorists believe that classifying asexuality as a unique sexual orientation creates an opportunity for asexuality to be understood and studied as a variation of human sexuality. Further, Lori Brotto and Morag Yule (2017:625) state that the asexual community would like to see asexuality classified as a unique sexual orientation as they believe that there is sufficient evidence to accept asexuality as an asexual orientation that can overlap with other orientations (Brotto & Yule 2017:625). The argument for asexuality as a sexual orientation is also made by Bogaert (2006:247).

- Asexuality and the LGBTQIA+ community

The human sexual assumption found in Western society, which naturalises heterosexuality as well as normalising sex as an aspect of a healthy adult life, marginalises everything that is not heterosexual and that is non-sexual (Carrigan 2011:474; DeLuzio Chasin 2011:718; Galupo *et al* 2018:1242; Gupta 2017:992; Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:650). Doug Meyer (2017:332) states that "the 'promise' of happiness tends to encourage conforming to traditional gender and sexuality norms". By adopting an identity that coincides with traditional heteronormativity but exists within an alternative category, the notion that traditionally held social norms are the only source of self-acceptance and in turn "happiness" is challenged as an unstable, unachievable promise that all humans will experience. Minority sexual and gender identifiers have been established and defined in relation to and as alternatives to traditionally held social norms, and in this light, these new identities draw upon existing languages, naturalised behaviours and stereotypes in order to exist as alternatives to heteronormative systems. Therefore, in order to adopt a minority identity, a critical understanding of societal normalisations and stereotyped behaviours has to be undertaken.

Despite rejecting heteronormative ideologies, alternative orientations uphold their own set of prejudices and stereotypes, which work to legitimise each identifier through a similar process of naturalisation. These prejudices and stereotypes are often imposed onto physical manifestations of individuals. Bodies exist in "representational spaces", which are lived spaces that consist of "images and symbols" that work with social practices, allowing for the existence of social norms (Tyler & Cohen 2010:181). Jessica Murray (2013:11) argues that the most fundamental and recognised boundary formation found within society is gender and the hierarchies that are at play within constructed gender ideologies. The categorisation of gender, as well as sexuality, would not be relevant if not for the "heterosexual matrix" (Cuthbert

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2019:844); the viewing of gender within static binary poles contributes to the naturalisation of hegemonic, heteronormative ideologies that exist and reside on all bodies.

 LGBTQIA+ identities and asexual identities do not fit into the sexual norm and thus have been marginalised and pathologised. Scherrer (2008:635) maintains that adopting an LGBTQIA+ identity is not at odds with the adoption of an asexual identity. Figure 2 presents the Gender Unicorn,[22] an infographic which can be used to discuss and examine one's gender identity,[23] gender expression/presentation,[24] sex assigned at birth,[25] physical attraction[26] and romantic/emotional attraction[27] (TSER 2015). The arrows act as a sliding scale, with the left of the arrow indicating small-scale identification, and the right being large-scale identification. The creators of this infographic explicitly state that the graphic includes people who identify as agender and asexual, maintaining that "identifying on the left of the sexuality spectra would indicate no attraction" (TSER 2015). Each component of the Gender Unicorn is independent, and therefore does not affect other identifying scales (Cuthbert 2019:862). Through the use of the Gender Unicorn, it is evident that those who identify as asexual may also identify with other sexual minority orientations, as well as identify with gender identities that fall within the LGBTQIA+ community.

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[22] This infographic is created by a youth-led American organisation called Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER) which is "dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender nonconforming students through advocacy and empowerment." Their main goal is to educate the public on LGBTQIA+ matters and they do this through a multitude of services such as workshops, infographics and scholarships. The Gender Unicorn is their most popular infographic. They state that they created the infographic in order to portray a distinction between gender, sex assigned at birth, and sexuality (TSER 2023).

[23] Gender identity refers to one's internal understanding of being male, female, neither, both or another gender identity.

[24] Gender expression/presentation refers to the ways that one decides to physically display their preferred gender identity.

[25] Sex assigned at birth is described as the assignment and classification of people as "male, female or intersex based on a combination of anatomy, hormones and chromosomes" (TSER 2015).

[26] Gender expression/presentation refers to one's sexual orientation.

[27] Romantic/emotional attraction refers to one's romantic orientation.

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Figure 2: The Gender Unicorn, Trans Student Educational Resources (2015).

As I have demonstrated above, as a complex spectrum of asexual identities, asexuality allows individuals to have overlapping LGBTQIA+ identities such as biromantic, homoromantic, demisexual,[28] bi-curious and panromantic (Carrigan 2011:469). As Przybylo (2019:102) argues, asexuality "is to find a point of concord between oneself, one's body," as a means of coming to a set of identities that work together as whole with an end-goal of indexically embodying one's sense of self. Adopting and accepting an identity that rejects and redefines traditionally held heteronormativity "is a powerful part of self-expression" that is common within asexual communities (Przybylo 2019:102). Asexuality allows for the rethinking of gender boundaries, which often leads gender non-conforming identities to be constructed and adopted by asexuals. Several scholars state that statistically asexuals are more likely to be trans-identified or claim a gender identity beyond male and female, considering that some asexuals lack the desire to attract a sexual partner. This means that asexuals feel freer to explore their own genders (Cuthbert 2019:848; Bush *et al* 2021:730; Carroll 2019:7,14; Rothblum *et al* 2020:758; Antonsen *et al* 2020:1622; Kenney 2020:11; Gupta 2019; MacNeela & Murphy 2015:800,806; Scherrer 2009:61; DeLuzio Chasin 2011:716). Hall (1996:4) argues that identities "are never unified", further stating that identities are constructed through multiple discourses, practices and positions. He maintains that the identities that exist in our current

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[28] A demisexual is someone who only experiences sexual attraction when they are emotionally connected to their partner (Carrigan 2011:470).

history are "increasingly fragmented and fractured". As a form of identification, the category of gender should not be understood as a biological, naturalised identifier, but rather a constructed ideology. Gender identities exist in plurality and are "invariably implicated into one another", however as a regulatory norm, gender identity roles and descriptors are constructed through the heteronormative and gender matrix (Butler 2011:78,108).

The binary gender categories, namely male and female, remain at the forefront of the gender matrix; through this system, gender becomes the "mechanism by which notions of masculinity and femininity are produced and naturalised" (Butler 2004:42). The body becomes materialised as a symbol for preconceived notions that govern gender identification, communicating non-verbally about the assumed sex of one's body, all the while allowing for reiterated gender representations to influence the ways in which an individual decides to perform their gender identity. The gender matrix is problematic and limiting as it normalises and stabilises the polarised ends of gender, using representations of traditional gender roles, gender expressions and social institutions to determine the way gender categories appear. Through the reiteration of binarised gender categories, gender norms are easily recognisable. Gender norms that conform to binary and hierarchal heteronormativity become examples of successful, fixed gender performances (Tyler & Cohen 2010:178).

The traditional gender identities that are integrated with human sexual assumptions found in Western societies allow for the marginalisation of the "Other": those who do not comply with the heteronormative myth of compulsory sexuality. Identification systems that privilege identity categories, which are intertwined with fixed traditional social norms, create systems of oppression, which in turn leads to Othering (Carroll 2019:3). To be Othered in the sense of taking an alternative identifier can often lead to being pathologised and dehumanised. However, traditional gender binarisation allow for "middle zones and hybrid formations" that exist between male and female gender categories (Butler 2004:108). These middle-grounds, despite being understood through heteronormativity, destabilise and deconstruct the stable, either/or nature of gender binarisation. As has been stated, identifying as asexual leads to a rejection of compulsory heterosexuality; this means that many asexuals work towards a further altering of norms through a specific asexualised gender identity. Self-identified asexuals struggle with maintaining the normative ideals that surround gender. To repeat, asexuality represents the possibility of "escaping the matrix", giving asexual people the freedom to do gender differently (Cuthbert 2019:848). This results in a sense of difference that is often evoked

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during adolescence, and only through acknowledging this difference, as well as the social norms that are constantly influencing identification, does one proceed with constructing a new identity. It is often after encountering asexuality and the ways in which it challenges these norms, that asexual individuals reject culturally held gender norms (Scherrer 2008:631). The LGBTQIA+ acronym encompasses genders and therefore these asexuals can identify with a LGBTQIA+ identity.

LGBTQIA+ and asexual individuals go through a similar self-identification process, although asexuals do not have the same pressure to 'come out', as asexual people usually pass as sexual people in their daily lives, although sex is not a major aspect in their lives (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:719). Both LGBTQIA+ identities and asexual identities have identity-based online communities which allow for privacy and identity formation in a safe space (Scherrer 2008:624). However, LGBTQIA+ communities are also found in physical spaces, such as bars, where they have globally recognised cultural symbols like the rainbow flag, which contributes to a greater self-acceptance (Scherrer 2008:637). Like other LGBTQIA+ identities and orientations, asexuality is more than likely to be excluded from school curriculums, and those who fall under the LGBTQIA+ acronym need to spend time actively recognising and unlearning 'straightening effects' that are entangled within society's idea of sexuality.

Historically, like the asexual community, the LGBTQIA+ community has faced discrimination and pathologisation (Scherrer 2008:622). Cowan and LeBlanc (2018) indicate that from as early as 1993, studies have been conducted with an interest in discovering a "cause" for homosexuality, and pathologisation like this resulted in homosexuality being classified as a mental illness until 1973 (Cowan & LeBlanc 2018:32; Brotto & Yule 2017:623). The pathologisation of LGBTQIA+ identities has led to homonegativity, which Cassandra Thorpe and Kelly Arbeau (2020:308) describe as the negative attitudes that sexual minorities elicit from those who are involved in sexual majority groups. These attitudes include isolation, internalised homonegativity, depression symptoms and self-destructive behaviour. Hoffarth *et al* (2016:90) refer to this as anti-gay prejudice, which, they contend, is strongly linked to the moral oppression of homosexuality. Due to queer and feminist movements, LGBTQIA+ identities have become more widely accepted in Western societies and are no longer as strongly pathologised and stigmatised as they have been in the past (Cerankowski & Milks 2014:2).

Asexual individuals are often pathologised and are interrogated about their sexual life, mental health, and emotional intelligence. Like most minority sexual orientations and sexual identities, asexuality continues to be viewed negatively, as it challenges the myth of compulsory sexuality.[29] According to Scherrer (2008:622-637), both LGBTQIA+ individuals and asexuals have experienced historical and contemporary discrimination connecting from medical institutions. Asexual sceptics have argued that asexuality may be caused by past sexual trauma or a deficiency in hormones (Robbins *et al* 2016:752). Historically LGBTQIA+ identities were once treated as disorders, and due to the lack of research on asexual identities, asexual identities are often presumed to be linked to sexual desire disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). The DSM defines HSDD as "persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity", marked by distress or interpersonal difficulties. While characteristics of asexuality overlap with HSDD, most self-identified asexuals do not fall into a HSDD diagnosis as they do not report feeling distressed as a result of their lack of sexual desire or attraction. The diagnosis of HSDD is also frowned upon by the asexual community, as it assumes that "normal" or healthy sexual functioning warrants humans to have active, fixed sexual desires and sexual fantasies (Lund & Johnson 2015:125; Carroll 2019:10). As a multifaceted spectrum that allows for a multitude of experiences, including self-identified asexuals that do experience sexual desire and arousal, some asexuals voluntarily participate in solo or partnered sexual activities (Bulmer & Izuma 2018:963-964; Przybylo 2019:43). Therefore, pathologising asexuality as a symptom of an underlining sexual desire disorder only works to further delegitimise asexuality as a sexual identifier.

Due to the medical profession's mistaken tendency to pathologise asexuality, Przybylo (2019) states that asexual individuals are often fetishised and are coerced into sex as a way of conversion or a confirmation of their asexuality. Asexual-identified people are often stereotyped as being sexless, prudish, lonely and unattractive, and asexuality is often wrongly characterised as being repulsed by sex.[30] Asexual prejudice found within the LGBTQIA+ community and heterosexual communities leads self-identified asexuals feeling alienated from other sexual identities. Asexuality continues to experience stigmatisation, dehumanisation and

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[29] According to Przybylo (2019:1) "sexuality is presumed to be natural and normal". Carter Vance (2018:139) refers to Butler (1993), stating that sexuality is a socially determined construct that "is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms." Compulsory sexuality privileges and promotes heteronormativity and heterosexuality (Vance 2018:134).

[30] Asexuality is a spectrum sexual orientation, and those who are asexual experience varieties of sex positivity, sex neutrality and being sex repulsed.

legitimisation, which contributes to the invisibility of non-sexuality in LGBTQIA+ spaces (Gupta 2017:991; Gupta 2019:8). This is disheartening for self-identified asexuals as they have complex identities which overlap with other identities in the LGBTQIA+ community (Vares 2018:521).

Van Houdenhove *et al* (2017:649) states that there is a gap in biological research conducted on asexuality due to resistance within the asexual community and their fear that looking into the "causes" of asexuality could inspire some individuals to use research outcomes to prevent or "cure" asexuality. Despite asexuality becoming more recognised throughout Western popular culture and within academia, asexuality as a marker of self-identification remains highly pathologised and stigmatised, even within LGBTQIA+ spaces. The inclusion of asexuality into the LGBTQIA+ community could allow for depathologisation of asexuality and provide visibility for asexuality as a unique sexual orientation, allowing more people to explore the spectra of asexual identities. The self-identification of asexuals has been repeatedly discussed as important for those identifying under the asexual spectrum as it allows asexuality to be seen as a unique and valid sexual orientation.

1.3.2   *Asexual representations in television characters*

Visual imagery, and important to this study, traditional television imagery, visually conveys communication through a practice of multimodality (Ismail, Rashidin & Ahmad 2017:351-352). Multimodality "describes communication practices in terms of the textual, aural, linguistic, spatial and visual resources", which are used to convey messages (Ismail *et* al 2017:352). The media plays an important role in "shaping people's knowledge, desires, practices and expectations" (Barker, Gill & Harvey 2018:1337). According to Larry Gross (1991:22), mass media has become the primary source for "common information and images that create and maintain a world view and a value system." He states that what is understood as 'mainstream' is cultivated through the observation of reiterated patterns across mass media and the genres found within mass media. Gilad Padva (2008:58) states that most of the images found in mass media communications "reflect the experiences and interests of the majority of groups" in current society and Jessica Willis (2008:241) argues that mass media is understood as a social institution. This social institution is created, reproduced and maintained by humans for humans, however it is limiting as it decidedly serves the dominant cultural ideology.

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Research has shown that past and current television representations are largely concerned with heteronormativity that "preserves a binary, rigid, and hierarchal perception of biological sex, gender and sexuality" (Dhaenens 2014:520; Barker *et al* 2018:1338; Masanet, Ventura & Ballesté 2022:144; Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012:702-703; Jacobs & Meeusen 2021:2148). Through reiterated themes, narratives and stereotyped typecasting, popular culture aids in maintaining heteronormative practices as "standard, and creating a hegemonic image where those who do not comply with the heterosexual standard are excluded from the centre" (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012:703). This means that LGBTQIA+ representations are governed by heteronormativity (Dhaenens 2014:520). Laura McInroy and Shelly Craig (2017:32) state that until the mid-1990s LGBTQIA+ individuals were not consistently represented in the media, and the first representations of LGBTQIA+ identities on television in the 1960s, which were highly stereotyped, have become tropes that are still used in contemporary media.

According to Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey (2018:1338) previous LGBTQIA+ representations largely focused on lesbian and gay depictions, rather than bisexual and transgender depictions. They state that often, lesbian and gay people are represented through a heteronormative lens that is "focused around marriage and family, and [they are] often de-sexualized" (Barker *et al* 2018:1338). Frederik Dhaenens (2014:523) states that when LGBTQIA+ people, specifically lesbian and gay individuals, appeared in mainstream media, they were negatively stereotyped and producers "emphasized their departure from the 'natural' order". Lissitsa and Kushnirovich (2021:2510) state that past images of LGBTQIA+ identities were negatively generalised through characteristics of poor mental health and criminality.

LGBTQIA+ and homosexuality have been framed as being 'different', with these Othered sexual orientations displayed as deviant (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2152). Laura Jacobs and Cecil Meeusen (2021:2148) state that through the generalisation of non-heteronormative identities, and a lack of focus on individual identities, stereotypes of LGBTQIA+ people are established. This overlooks the uniqueness and diversity of LGBTQIA+ identities (Jacobs & Meeusen 2021:2161). Through generalisations, as well as the invisibility of certain LGBTQIA+ identities in traditional television, the recognition of these identities as legitimate social groups is jeopardised (Jacob & Meeusen 2021:2148).

Stereotyped depictions of LGBTQIA+ characters are still found within contemporary LGBTQIA+ representations, with producers presenting LGBTQIA+ characters as comic relief, villains, mentally/physically ill, outcasted, shy and these characters often merely appear in the background (McInroy & Craig 2017:34; Theo 2019:676). Erin Waggoner (2018) states that by repeating tropes and stereotypes within an already marginalised community, those watching, including LGBTQIA+ identified individuals, begin to misinterpret an identity or a sexual orientation (Waggoner 2018:1879). Murray (2013:3) states that through "flat characters" such as in the case of LGBTQIA+ depictions, these characters "are generally not the protagonist of the stories about them." Producers also portray these characters one-dimensionally, exaggerating stereotyped gender expectations and placing an emphasis on their sexual orientation as an issue that they are always struggling with (Waggoner 2018:1878; McInroy & Craig 2017:39-40).

Sheldon Cooper from the series *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady 2007-2019) can be examined as character that represents asexuality through negative characteristics. Sheldon is portrayed as an extremely intelligent physicist; however, he is characterised as socially awkward. Despite having a girlfriend, other characters are constantly pointing out his lack of interest towards romance, as well as his overall lack of sexual attraction. He is also sexualised in some episodes, and he is often shown wearing revealing outfits (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Sheldon (left) and Leonard (right) standing outside, "Pilot", *The Big Bang Theory*. 2007.

Figure 4: Sheldon in a public space, "The Locomotion Interruption",
The Big Bang Theory. 2007.

Despite the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities into mainstream television, without providing well-rounded characters that present accurate representations of sexual minorities, mass media reaffirms heteronormativity (Dhaenens 2014:520). Masanet *et al* (2022:143) argue that, although many LGBTQIA+ depictions remain stereotypical and narrow, television has the opportunity to provide realistic and non-stereotypical LGBTQIA+ representations. These representations can become "aspirational" representative models that improve the visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities in societies. LGBTQIA+ identities have increased in the media over the past two decades and these representations have undergone profound changes (Padva 2008:520; Barker *et al* 2018:1338; Masanet *et al* 2022:144; McInroy & Craig 2015:32). It should be noted that despite this apparent increase, the number of LGBTQIA+ representations that are found on television is far fewer than heterosexual representations (Waggoner 2018:1878). As stated, the LGBTQIA+ community was previously visualised through "outrageous and stereotypical" tropes (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2521). However, Maria-Jose Masanet, Rafael Ventura and Eduard Ballesté (2022:143-144) note that a transitional period is taking place where LGBTQIA+ identities are now being granted more visibility after "an absence of representation, censorship, omission" and underrepresentation. The LGBTQIA+ representations that are currently offered on television fall into two categories that Masanet *et al* (2022:143-144) propose, namely imperfect representations and fair representations. The former refers to "stereotyping, only-negative representations, ridiculization, simplistic representations" and stigmatising portrayals, while the latter refers to "effective representation, rich and multilayered portrayal, positive models, complex and realistic characters" and diversity of roles and identities. McInroy and Craig (2015:34) state that LGBTQIA+ depictions are becoming increasingly more positive, with LGBTQIA+

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characters being portrayed in similar ways to their non-LGBTQIA+ counterparts. LGBTQIA+ characters are presented more dynamically – they have storylines that are not limited to their sexual or gender identities, and when their LGBTQIA+ status is discussed, stereotypes of the past are not repeated.

As the primary site for social knowledge production regarding LGBTQIA+ identities, the increase of LGBTQIA+ representations in the media plays an important role in allowing the general public to encounter a diversity of LGBTQIA+ identities (McInroy & Craig 2015:33). With an increase in LGBTQIA+ representations, LGBTQIA+ identities become increasingly accessible. McInroy and Craig state that the media is often the first place where heterosexuals encounter LGBTQIA+ individuals (2015:33). According to Jacobs and Meeusen (2021:2145) "the way homosexuality is covered by the mass media has the potential to set social norms regarding sex and sexual identity," and therefore, television depictions have an influence on society's understanding about LGBTQIA+ identities. They argue that mass media becomes a very informative site for individuals who lack direct contact with LGBTQIA+ people, with "mediated exposure" operating as a "substitute for real-life contact with LGBT[QIA+] people." Furthermore, Jacobs and Meeusen state that "mass-mediated contact with social groups has been found to reduce prejudice" (2021:2148). On this note, Masanet *et al* (2022:143) argue that an increase in the diversity of LGBTQIA+ representations in mass media can "contribute to generating pedagogies that reduce social prejudice towards LGBTQ[IA]+ people and also offer aspirational models for them to identify with." This therefore humanises LGBTQIA+ identities, allowing for the possibility of real-life visibility and acceptance.

Media representation of LGBTQIA+ people helps to facilitate LGBTQIA+ individuals' self-identification process by reinforcing and normalising marginalised identities. According to Hall (1996:2), "identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group". McInroy and Craig (2015:35) state that LGBTQIA+ individuals often lack access to identity-related information. Waggoner (2018:1878) also notes that representations found within televised media have the potential to guide people within their own identity explorations. It is understood that, in the case of asexuality, when individuals are faced with self-questioning, they attempt to make sense of their apparent difference by seeking out answers (Carrigan 2011:473). Many potential asexuals and LGBTQIA+ individuals rely on fictional characters and media narratives as a source of personal identification due to lacking real-life role models, and by having LGBTQIA+ and

asexual characters in the media, there is an opportunity for those seeking self-clarification to legitimise and understand themselves more (McInroy & Craig 2017:33-38; Waggoner 2018:1877). Accurate and positive representations are needed when portraying LGBTQIA+ identities, because, according to Hall (1996:4) identities are constructed within a discourse, and media is a discourse that has power over a large portion of society.

Reiterating lacking, negative and fixed stereotypes of asexuality in media representations is detrimental to understanding the complexity of asexuality (Osterwald 2017:37). According to Ester Rothblum, Kyra Heimann and Kylie Carpenter (2019:92) "just as the coming-out story becomes expected" for LGBTQIA+ character's narratives, asexuality also has a tightly developed storyline. Erick Burdock (2018:12) believes that some asexuals in American cinema are often alluded to as being homosexual, with their asexuality being simplified and generalised. Asexual characters are often represented through Othering: their personality traits are oppositional to their non-asexual counterparts, and often their physical, visual depictions separate them from the norm. They are often visually sexualised (Burdock 2018:33). Binary oppositions are often used in television representations of asexuality, where the asexual is depicted as abnormal, while the heteronormative character represents normality.

An example of this can be found within the depiction of Velma Dinkley in *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* (Roven & Suckle 2004). In earlier renditions of the series, Velma is characterised as a nerdy teenager who is passionate about science and solving mysteries, and she is not depicted as experiencing sexual or romantic attraction. Throughout the *Scooby-Doo* franchise, Velma is seen wearing a standard turtleneck sweater and tennis skirt outfit (Figure 5), however, when Daphne pressures Velma to romantically approach a male character, Daphne dresses Velma in a skin-tight red jumpsuit (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Velma Dinkley in her standard outfit, *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*. 2004.

Figure 6: Velma Dinkley after her makeover, *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*. 2004.

Media depictions of asexuality often use a dominant personality trait as a defining characteristic of asexual characters (Webster 2020:16). Gwendolyn Osterwald (2017:40) believes that this is done to keep viewers interested in these characters as without their narratives involving sex, they are perceived as uninteresting. Asexuality is often stereotyped through a lack of sexual

behaviour, leading asexuals to have 'busy' narratives that 'explain away' their asexuality. A lack of sexual desire resulting in a lack of sexual behaviour is stereotyped as "predominantly negative, destructive," and these asexuals are depicted as in need of a cure (Burdock 2018:21). Presenting asexuals as needing 'fixing' or 'curing' pathologically categorises asexuals as suffering from an abnormality (Osterwald 2017:37). Asexuals are also often characterised as single, with the writers stereotyping these characters as 'third wheels' to other couples, and evidently these characters are classified as 'forever alone'.

Joseph Brennan (2018:191) states that while accurate queer media representation is possible, it is constantly denied. Asexuality is a diverse spectrum that is very difficult to represent accurately. As a result of an overall lack of diversified asexual representations on television, many asexuals look at instances of 'non-sexuality' in non-asexual characters (Webster 2020:16). In this sense asexuality is implied but is not confirmed and asexual audiences associate these non-asexuals to be representations of asexuality. Often, producers bait audiences into believing that a character is asexual via "hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism" (Griffin 2018:190-191). Asexuals look for hints of asexuality in the media that they consume as a way to validate their asexuality. Hollis Griffin (2018:168) argues that even the most flawed characters "might allow for glimmers of self-recognition among asexual minority audiences". Furthermore, Barker *et al* (2018:1192) contend that "people respond affirmatively to a stimulus if the stimulus is positively associated with one's identity or allows one to express and reinforce their identity". Przybylo (2019:26) introduces "asexual resonances" as a term that has been reflected in the lives of asexuals who seek out asexual representations. "Asexual resonances" is defined as "undertaking an asexual reading of text that may not be identifiable as 'asexual' in terms of orientatory definitions" (Przybylo 2019:26). Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper (2014:298) state that through a queerly asexual reading, a broadening of what can "count" as asexual occurs, allowing for a more diverse spectrum of asexual representations.

In order to maintain a diversified spectrum of asexual representations, it is vital to present asexual characters similarly to LGBTQIA+ characters and heteronormative characters. Asexual experiences are not necessarily required to be defining traits when visually representing asexuality. Asexual characters should be presented through well-rounded, complex characterisations and narratives that provide realistic, identifiable instances of asexuality, ones that are easily identifiable not only to asexual individuals but to the general

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public. Through this visibility, asexuality can be naturalised in the media, and therefore there is a potential for the destigmatisation of asexuality as a sexual orientation.

1.3.3 *Asexual representations on social media platforms*

Waggoner (2018:1877-1878) argues that, although mainstream media fails to give a visual representative "voice" to many LGBTQIA+ identities, social media platforms allow for a broader, diverse presentation of these marginalised identities. According to Sabina Lissitsa and Nonna Kushnirovich (2021:2512), the introduction of the Internet has challenged the role of traditional media. New mainstream media are concerned with representations found on the Internet, on social networking sites (SNSs) and on social media platforms (McInroy & Craig 2015:321). SNSs are media platforms that offer users a unique, ideal space for self-presentation practices in order to "gratify their social and psychological needs and desires" (Kim & Chock 2011:560,563). According to Willis (2008:241), "the media as a social institution is created, reproduced and maintained by concrete individuals. It is a human made social institution that people increasingly have access to within our growing globalized world". It is important to note that by relying on already existing values, institutions, beliefs and practices, new media works to define and replicate ideologies that are found within the real world (Iqani & Schroeder 2015:411). Therefore, the Internet, including SNSs like social media platforms, reproduces already existing societal prejudices and tradtional norms (Gámez-Guadix & Incera 2021:1).

Social media, like television, has the potential both to embrace and resist hegemonic discourses. These platforms provide space for users, and in this case LGBTQIA+ users, to perform their identities and group identities in a way that might not be possible in their everyday lives. Waggoner (2018:1880) states that there is a vital need for good representation: this aids people in discovering different identities and negotiating their own identity. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, representation is an essential aspect of their own identity meaning-making processes. McInroy and Craig (2017:34) maintain that media representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals aid in the development of LGBTQIA+ identities.

SNSs enable like-minded individuals to form communities (Murray 2015:497). Community, defined by Lugosi (2007:164), "is a useful collective term to describe a series of ideologies and the social and institutional practices that perpetuate them". Waggoner (2018:188) states that some LGBTQIA+ individuals use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to enhance

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themselves and self-represent themselves, and they also use CMC to engage with those who take on a similar identity. It is important to emphasise that social media platforms like Instagram rely on users to create online personas according to how they would like to be perceived. Celine Morin, Arnaud Merier and Laëtitia Atlani-Duault (2019:1) state that images are powerful tools that social media users utilise to generate meaning. Social media remains a stable site for meaning-making and enables users to communicate freely with one another through the sharing of digital material. Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2018:209) note that social media platforms provide "existential security", which works by aiding users in integrating their personal identities into digital spaces. Identity is expressive: identity allows individuals to be recognised in society, leading to the creation of a cohesive, collective group identity. Collective identities allow for "mobilisation in the public sphere as a cohesive unit with agreed aims and interests" (Munday 2006:91). According to Carrigan (2011:473), "identity acqusition is a temporal process which takes place within changing social and cultural contexts". Hall (1996:4) states that identities are created and navigated within, and not outside, representation. Identities are therefore produced and reproduced in specific historical and institutional sites, and rely on current traditionally held norms. According to Cowan and LeBlanc (2018:39), in order to recognise the current cultural norm, it is important to understand what is considered abnormal. Osterwald (2017:37) states that modern society still promotes and privileges compulsory heterosexuality. This sexual assumption reinforces sex as a prerequisite for human flourishing. Rothblum *et al* (2019) agree, stating that 'the culture of sex' is focused on in all forms of mainstream media. For self-identified asexuals, an asexual "adolescent experience gives rise to a sense of difference from a peer group, provoking self-questioning and the assumption of pathology" (Carrigan 2011:471-473; Mollet & Lackman 2018:620). Therefore a little or lack of sexual attraction goes against the grain. As argued, non-self-identified asexuals may not be aware of their non-sexual attractions and might view their lack of sexual attraction as a biological issue. However, they might come to an asexual identity after learning about asexuality through social media (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:720).

As stated by McInroy and Craig (2015:40) few representations exist on television that accurately present the diverse nature of sexual minority groups. Importantly, Rhea Hoskin and Allison Taylor (2019:289) argue that representation often homogenises all differences that "disturb expectations and normative systems of identity. Homogeneity upholds ideals of normalcy and functions as a model against which the self is measured, judged and corrected". Social media platforms offer a world that contains diversified identities, which "translates into

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a more multifaceted and influential ecosystem" (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2510). Derek Conrad Murray (2015:490) states that SNSs and social media applications encourage users to capture, speak of and digitalise the most intimate and private moments of their lives. In line with this, Andi Schwartz (2022:51) notes that users cultivate "collaborative selves" through a process of repeated communication of their inner thoughts and feelings. Amanda Lagerkvist (2014:209) also notes that users form their online identity through "increasingly fragmented and versatile forms of individual and collective membership". Randolph Chan (2022:2) states that users make use of social media in order to seek out relevant information that is lacking in their offline world. Social media platforms are powerful socialisation spaces (Gross 1991:27), where people can come across previously invisible minority groups. Social media creates spaces where groups of individuals such as asexuals can work on self-representation, expression and reflection, and people can become involved in collaboration and knowledge building (Ross 2012:25). Individuals may integrate their real-life identities into their curated digital selves.

Virtual communities become a space where stigmatised, marginalised identity groups and individuals can come together to form supportive communities (Scherrer 2008:624). Teut (2019:97) argues that LGBTQIA+ sexual minority groups such as asexuals are harrassed and excluded from larger LGBTQIA+ communities, and by coming across asexual-inclusive LGBTQIA+ virtual communities, asexuals are introduced to more online support networks. Therefore, the Internet and social media platforms create spaces where stigmatised groups, such as asexuals, can find a community that supports their identity and beliefs (Scherrer 2008:624). This also means there is a possiblity that those who are unsure about their levels of sexual attraction could come across a virtual community of asexuals, and then begin the process of adopting an asexual identity. By sharing intimate personal stories online, marginalised groups such as asexuals might experience a greater social acceptance and an increase in positive mainstream representations (Vivienne 2017:128).

1.4   Queer Theoretical Framework

Throughout this study a queer theoretical framework will be utilised. First and foremost, the term "queer" differs from the identifier found within the LGBTQIA+ acronym. "Queer", associated with the LGBTQIA+ acronym, is term that makes reference to any individual that identifies with a sexual orientation that is not "straight" or heterosexual, or a gender identity

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that does not reflect their assigned sex at birth. Queer is often used as a simplified umbrella term for the stigmatised and marginalised (Meyer 2017:333) and is offered as an alternative label to LGBTQIA+ identities.

Within a queer theoretical framework, "queer"[31] is a term that indicates strategic resistance to dominant social and cultural norms, with a firmly established focus on protesting heteronormativity (Warner 1991:16; Cerankowski & Milks 2010:660; Sullivan 2003:43-50; Berger 2018:268). Queer theory is an interdisciplinary field that is concerned with disempowering heteronormativity, actively seeking out modern ways to transgress and transcend this pervasive social order system (Cole & Cate 2008:279; Price 2020:401). Furthermore, a queer theoretical framework defies, criticises, dismantles and polices gender and sexuality essentialism, creating room to "queer" these traditionally held norms by showcasing them as social constructs. Therefore, through a queer theoretical framework, heteronormativity's naturalness is contested, and its previously unchallenged assumptions are reevaluated, leading to a sense of a revealed 'freedom' from heteronormativity amongst all social beings who are situated in hetero- dominated cultural and social order systems (Price 2020:402). In essence, a queer theoretical framework is used in order to investigate culturally and historically constructed institutions of power and oppression, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality, with the aim of broadening the understanding of queerness as it relates to sex, gender and sexuality (Sullivan 2008:81; Warner 1991:13).

Furthermore, queer theory is not merely concerned with establishing equality amongst heterosexuality and its opposite category, homosexuality. Rather, queer theory radically questions and challenges cultural and social institutions that privilege the heterosexual hierarchy. Queer theory mobilises "nonnormative logics and organisations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time," establishing alternative ways to think about kinship structures, heterosexuality and ideas surrounding reproduction (Cerankowski & Milks 2014:3; Sadlier 2019:440). A queer theoretical framework offers a contemporary avenue for new ways of reading, thinking and understanding particular cultural and historical texts and discourses by deconstructing the naturalisation of heterosexuality and its dependency on its fixed, generalised binary opposite, homosexuality (Warner 1991:4;

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[31] As a term, queer is frequently understood as being inconsistent; it refers to whatever is at odds with normativity during a specific time period, and therefore, the precise scope of "queer" cannot be summarised (Sullivan 2003:43).

Sullivan 2003:43-51; Gamson & Moon 2004:49). Queer theory is therefore interested in deconstructing concepts such as sexuality, presenting them as continually negotiated social constructs that are fluid and plural. This in turn provides new, valuable insight into discourses and norms that surround sexuality. In this sense, although queer theory is central to discourses relating to gender, sexuality and identity, queer theory additionally scrutinises discourses and institutions that do not immediately pertain to gender, sexuality and identity normativity. A few institutions and discourses that queer theory critiques include law and policy, healthcare, religion and spirituality.

As it stands, by employing a queer theoretical framework, eradicating traditionally held binary oppositions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as dismantling compulsory sexuality, asexuality is validated as a sexual orientation. Furthermore, a queer theoretical approach to asexuality raises questions about choice: it complicates the fixed "assumed" sexual aspect of identity that is imposed onto both the "heterosexual" and the "homosexual" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010:658), all the while separating sex from procreation, contending that there is no single correct "outcome" for sexuality (Sullivan 2003:13). When a queer theoretical framework is implemented, alternative intimacies, partnerships and kinships are revealed, ones that often are adopted by asexuality. Therefore, by utilising a queer theoretical framework when engaging with cultural and historical texts, as well as engaging with media found within visual culture, the representations of asexuality are identifiable.

1.5   Research Methodology

In this study I shall use semiotics and Gadamerian hermeneutic methodological approaches when critically analysing representations of asexuality found in television characters and on social media platforms. The study will therefore be qualitative.

1.5.1   *Semiotics*

According to Gillian Rose (2016:107) semiology is the study of signs. While Arthur Berger (2014:22) defines semiology as a science of signs which provide meaning, Daniel Chandler (2021) states that "anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something". Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are described as the founding fathers of semiotics: de Saussure is known for semiology, which is concerned with the problem of meaning and linguistics as a system of signs that express ideas (Barthes 1991 [1957]:110;

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Berger 2014:22). In de Saussure's semiology (1961), signs form part of a two-part model, namely the signifier and the signified. For de Saussure, it is through an associated relationship between the signifier and the signified that the meaning of the sign can be interpreted (Berger 2014:22). Peirce's theory of signs is a theory of "experience, a theory of consciousness", and his semiotics is concerned with the truth, as he believes that all knowledge can only take place in signs (Liszka 1996:5). Peirce sees semiotics as a branch of philosophy, and states that semiotics can be applied across disciplines (Liszka 1996:14-16). Peirce categorises signs into many typologies, but his most frequently used categories are icons, indexes and symbols.

Roland Barthes uses semiology to ask questions about representation and hidden meaning in media, focusing on daily life in France during the 1950s (Van Leeuwen 2011:93; Barthes 1991 [1957]:10,18). Barthesian semiotics is focused on the layering of meaning stored in media, and Barthes (1991 [1957]:113) believes that a sign can become a myth when it is associated with a concept and an object. Barthes (1991 [1957]:113) therefore uses semiotics to analyse and explain overlooked aspects in everyday life and media that are seen as "natural".

Signs found in an image work in relation to other signs (Rose 2016:126). Many images are created with a preferred meaning, while others have a complex relationship to what they represent. Academics will often use semiotics as a methodology to analyse their chosen media critically in order to determine a potential deeper meaning. By way of example, Phoebe Pua and Mie Hiramoto (2020) use semiotics to analyse stereotyped behaviours surrounding race, sexuality and the typecasting of media characters in Hollywood 'ninja' films. Morin *et al* (2019) conduct a study that semiologically analyses the text-image relationships in tweets during the Ebola epidemic in 2014. Giada Goracci (2016) analyses Mae West by using semiotics to dive into West's body and performance as having a double-meaning, and how she is able to manipulate culture by creating a myth through "self-mockery and irony". Willis (2008) discusses the film *Juno* (Reitman 2007) in relation to the semiotics of girlhood, sexuality, femininity and the pregnant body.

1.5.2 *Hermeneutics*

Hans-Georg Gadamer acknowledges that due to an individual's own prejudices, pre-understandings, personal knowledge and belief systems[32] it is impossible to remain objective when interpreting an image or a text. By failing to acknowledge one's own horizon, one risks

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[32] Gadamer refers to one's belief system as one's horizon.

misunderstanding or misjudging a meaning (Fleming, Gaidys & Robb 2003:115). Gadamerian hermeneutics helps one come to an understanding by using their prejudices: it does not, however, legitimise one's prejudices (Gadamer 2006:45). One's tradition[33] and horizon are needed in order to come to an authentic understanding (Gadamer 2006:45). A historical consciousness plays an important role in Gadamer's hermeneutics and is able to influence one's horizon. Images and texts also have their own set of horizons, and when interpreting a text or an image, one needs to identify their own pre-understandings and the pre-understandings of the text and/or image in order to "fuse" both horizons. Fusion of horizons refers to the process of the hermeneutic circle: one approaches a text, acknowledging their own horizon, as well as the text's horizon. The interpreter will seek an understanding rather than an explanation and will read and reread the text with both horizons in mind. This creates a dialogue between two horizons, and the fusion of horizon can be seen as fusing into a third horizon (Demirezen 2018:41; Kinsella 2006:[sp]). The hermeneutic circle continues with reflecting and reaches an ambiguous agreement, and it is important to note that there is no single fixed interpretation of a text: in Gadamerian hermeneutics, each interpreter comes with their own horizons which will fuse with the horizons of the intended text. Coming to an understanding means that one has questioned and reflected on the dialogue between their own pre-judgements and the text's pre-judgments, and this will mean that the interpreter's horizon has been changed. Therefore, through an interpretive understanding of a text, meaning is made.

Gadamerian's hermeneutics and hermeneutics as an art of interpretation have been used in multiple human sciences. Alexander Fedorov, Anastasia Levitskaya, Olga Gorbatkova and Galina Mikhaleva (2018) use a hermeneutical approach when critically analysing representations of teachers in Western film. The authors use a hermeneutical analysis by looking at the how sexuality, violence, predator behaviour, crime, minority groups, sexual deviations and ideologies were used in their respective horizons and historicity. For example, Patricia Romero-Alcalá, José Herńandez-Padilla, Cayetano Ferńandez-Sola, María Coín-Pérez-Carrasco, Carmen Ramos-Rodríguez, María Ruiz-Ferńandez, and José Granero-Molina (2019) conducted a qualitative and interpretative study based on Gadamerian hermeneutics to come to an understanding of how male partners of women diagnosed with fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS)[34] perceive sexuality. The authors asked specific questions, reflected upon

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[33] Tradition refers to one's time periods, culture, class, race and own experiences (Gadamer 2006:45).
[34] Fibromyalgia syndrome is a chronic musculoskeletal disease which impacts physical, mental and sexual health (Romero-Alcalá *et al* 2019:1).

their pre-understanding of female sexuality and FMS, and attempted to understand the phenomenon by speaking to their patients. After this, through a dialogue with texts, and then after reading and reflecting, they consulted with their participants (Romero-Alcalá *et al* 2019:4). Fedorov (2014) conducted a hermeneutical analysis of Soviet military films from 1941-1942 by looking at the history, cultural factors, traditions, reality, ideological and political contexts of each film in order to get a better understanding of the films as a whole.

1.6 Summary of Chapters

Chapter one introduces the aims of the study, as well as a brief background of asexuality that contextualises how asexuality will be discussed throughout this study. Following this, an extensive Literature Review of asexuality is provided. This Literature Review discusses the exclusion of asexuality in LGBTQIA+ communities, focusing on the self-identification process of asexuals, asexuality as a unique sexual orientation, and the relation between asexuality and the LGBTQIA+ community. The Literature Review concludes by providing asexual theory concerned with asexual representations in television, as well as literature that discusses asexual representations on social media platforms. Next, this chapter introduces a queer theoretical framework that will inform this study. Finally, this chapter introduces the research methodology, namely semiotics and hermeneutics, that is utilised throughout chapters two and three.

Chapter two critically analyses representations of asexuality that are found within televised media The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of televised asexual representations. The rest of the chapter is concerned with providing analyses of representations of asexuality in selected television series. This is achieved by analysing asexual representations found within *Shortland Street* (Hollings *et al* 1992-), *Faking It* (Goodman & Wolov 2014-2016), *The March Family Letters* (Shelson 2014-2015), *Sex Education* (Nunn 2019-), *Euphoria* (Levinson 2019-) and *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020). These series were chosen because they present the diversified nature of asexuality. Four of these characters are self-identified asexuals, and the remining three are assumed asexuals. A two-tiered analysis is conducted for each character: firstly, each character is semiotically analysed, allowing for visual characterisations, and myths and tropes to be investigated. Secondly, utilising a sex critical approach, each representation of asexuality's characterisation and storyline is critiqued according to existing myths of asexuality. Through a sex-critical analysis, this chapter investigates the ways that

asexuality is portrayed by examining the visual and textual codes that are found within these selected examples. Therefore, this chapter critiques negative and positive myths of asexuality that are found within the sample of representations of asexuality.

Chapter three sets out to analyse representations of asexuality found on social media platforms, specifically on Twitter and Instagram. The analysis found within this chapter consist of a two-tiered analysis process: firstly, a semiotic analysis of each representation of asexuality is undertaken in order to identify significant stereotypes, tropes and myths of asexuality that have been concealed within the select sample of visual signifiers. This is followed by a critical analysis of each representation that critiques the semiotic findings using relevant asexual and queer theory. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to social media platforms and the vital role that they play in the construction and representation of online (and offline) personas. Following this, the chapter presents two types of online asexual representation categories, namely public persona representations of asexuality and self-representations of asexuality. The former is by investigating select digital examples from Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit on Twitter and Instagram), Venus Envy (@VenusEnvyDrag on Twitter, @venusenvydrag on Instagram) and Michelle Lin (on @lgbt's Instagram account). The latter explores the second category of representations of asexuality, namely self-representations of asexuality. This category investigates a select example of self-represented asexuals found on Asexual Looks (on Instagram @thisiswhatasexuallookslike). This chapter sets out to critique the ways that asexuals digitally present their asexuality in asexual and non-asexual spaces.

Chapter four is the concluding chapter that provides a summary of the chapters found within this study and sets out the contribution and impact of this study on research in Visual Studies. This chapter also indicates the limitations of the study, and supplies suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: ANALYSES OF ASEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN TELEVISION

2.1   Introduction

Mainstream media, a site of cultural meaning formation, is often the first place where individuals encounter LGBTQIA+ and non-normative identities (McInroy & Craig 2017:33). Dhaenens (2014:521) classifies television as a "quintessential post-modern medium," which is greatly involved in establishing and maintaining ideologies. This is achieved through a process of repeating ideologies that are found within political, structural, and cultural institutions, and further simplifying these ideologies in a way that is accessible to the general Western mainstream media viewer. Popular media tends to privilege hegemonic heteronormative discourses and is made to appeal to majority groups found in Western society (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012:703; Gross 1991:23; Padva 2008:58; Lagerkvist 2014:210). According to McInroy and Craig (2017:33), mass media aids in the "transmission of cultural experiences through characterological representations that socialize by creating and reinforcing behaviors and meanings of cultural appropriateness."

Until the 1980s, LGBTQIA+ characters in television were few and far between: they were found in repeated negative stereotypes and tropes and were pre-occupied with their sexual orientation (McInroy & Craig 2017:34). These characters were generally flat, one-dimensional background characters that continued to reiterate traditional notions of a heterosexual hegemonic society. These harmful portrayals led to the continuous negative portrayals of LGBTQIA+ individuals in society, marginalising them and leading to the further stigmatisation of anyone that is not strictly heteronormative. Asexuality found within television representations is often depicted through a belief that asexuals can be fixed and 'cured', with asexuality believed to be a temporary 'issue' that is a repression of underlying sexual attraction. Asexuals are also often stereotyped as being sex-repulsed and aromantic, with their storyline negatively centring around their asexual identity. Existing asexual characters are visually Othered and have 'quirky' personality traits that keep the non-asexual audience interested in these asexual narratives. These characters are usually background characters that aid in the main plot of the television series. Furthermore, asexuality is pathologised as a result of trauma and abuse.

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The dawn of the twenty-first century brought with it crucial new ways of presenting LGBTQIA+ characters to viewers of Western mainstream media that differed from past portrayals. LGBTQIA+ characters are steadily emerging more frequently in mainstream media, and unlike previous portrayals, these characters are more dynamic, well-rounded and complex. LGBTQIA+ characters are no longer one-dimensional characters that are merely forced into the background but are now main characters, whose storylines are not centred around their queer identity. However, it is important to note that there are characters who continue to be portrayed through stereotypes and are often treated unfairly in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012:704).

In recent years, social media has changed the way LGBTQIA+ individuals connect with the characters presented in mainstream media. Viewers directly engage with television series, the producers, the production company and the storyline. Television series are critiqued online, and producers have access to immediate feedback from all over the world (Waggoner 2018:1878). Fans of television series begin to analyse characters' narratives and attributes. Through repeated stereotyped characteristics, mainstream media creates typecasts that are often easy to identify (Pua & Hiramoto 2020:57), and viewers seek out characters that personify their own personal feelings and identities. At times, this is useful for those seeking validation for their own identities, but often, these stereotyped typecasts negatively impact the understandings of marginalised identities, leading to real-life pathology and stigmatisation.

Without diverse representations in the media, LGBTQIA+ individuals often self-identify with certain characters they assume to be queer, while these characters are not necessarily identifiable by heterosexual viewers (Gross 1991:20). This describes the act of headcanoning,[35] whereby LGBTQIA+ individuals create a headcanon for a specific character that they identify with. They will categorise specific characters or storylines as queer, and this is common because there is a lack of representation of queer identities in the media. Often, if the headcanon becomes popular throughout the community, producers and writers will come across it, and might even incorporate elements of headcanons into future storylines. This is not always accepted by the community: queerbaiting[36] is common in popular television, films, music videos and lyrics and online personalities. Producers bait queer audiences by hinting at

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[35] Headcanon refers to a fan-made theory or idea surrounding a character.
[36] Queerbaiting is a fan-conceived term. It refers to a tactic that media producers use to "suggest homoerotic subtext in popular television" (Brennan 2018:189).

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potential queer characters or storylines. but often these queer instances are not actualised into their media (Brennan 2018:189). This type of marketing baits queer audiences into interacting with what they believe to be queer media, only to find that these specific representations of queerness do not exist. Through negative, inaccurate, stereotyped and one-dimensional representations of LGBTQIA+ identities in the media, as well as through queerbaiting or the absolute lack of representation in the media, LGBTQIA+ identities remain stigmatised and othered in society.

Representations of asexuality that exist in the media have slowly been increasing in the past few years: however these representations often fail to point out that the asexuality that is understood in modern times is complex, making it nearly impossible to create a more dynamic representation through a singular character (Dawson, McDonnell & Scott 2016:351; Webster 2020:17). The invisibility of representations of asexuality in the media, as well as negative reiterations of asexual stereotypes, according to Katherine Bradway and Renée Beard (2015:505), provides a greater probability for the internalisation of harmful societal stereotypes within queer and non-queer spaces. These stereotypes also affect the way society views and accepts asexuality (Osterwald 2017:37). More well-rounded and complex representations of asexuality are required in order to create a space to help facilitate the self-questioning and self-identification processes of those who might be part of the asexual spectrum (Griffin 2018:167-168). In this sense, by coming across different asexual identities in the mainstream media, questioning potential asexuals may come to an asexual identity, self-identified asexuals may be able to validate their asexual identity, and non-asexuals may be introduced to asexuality for the first time.

This chapter seeks to critique the reiterated stereotypes that are found within existing asexual televised representations. I shall now critically analyse selected characters from *Shortland Street* (Hollings *et al* 1992-)*, Faking It* (Goodman & Wolov 2014-2016)*, The March Family Letters* (Shelson 2014-2015)*, Sex Education* (Nunn 2019-)*, Euphoria* (Levinson 2019-) and *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020). Seven characters in total will be critiqued: four of these characters self-identify as asexual (Gerald Tippett from *Shortland* Street, Brad from *Faking It*, Beth from *The March Family Letters* and Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman*). Of these four self-identified asexuals, three of them come to identify as asexual as the plot of the series develops (Gerald Tippett, Beth and Todd Chavez). The remaining three characters that are discussed in this chapter are assumed to be asexual: one character (Florence Simmons from

Sex Education) is shown to begin an asexual self-discovery process, but this is not explored, and she never identifies as asexual. Another character (Steve Morley from *Sex Education*) is assumed to be asexual, but his asexuality is not confirmed. Lastly, one character (Rue Bennet from *Euphoria*) is unknowingly labelled asexual by other characters, therefore making her asexual identity unconfirmed.

This study offers a two-tiered critique of the aforementioned representations of asexuality. The first tier consists of a semiotic and hermeneutic analysis of the asexual characters. Through this first analysis, myths of asexuality are identified. The second tier consists of a sex-critical reading of asexuality. In this reading, the identified myths of asexuality will be critiqued and analysed using asexual and queer theory. This sex-critical perspective is adopted from Lisa Downing (2013b:95), who states that "all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold." She states that "gross simplifications" of sexuality contribute to "silencing and making invisible the varieties of asexuality and those non-genital 'bodies and pleasures' (to use a Foucauldian term) that do not fit so neatly under the 'sexuality' umbrella". My aim is to interrogate how the television producers of these representations of asexuality have portrayed asexuality through the use of visual and textual communication tools.

In the next section I begin with Gerald Tippett in *Shortland Street* (1992-).

2.2   Gerald Tippett from *Shortland Street* (1992-)

Figure 7: Gerald Tippett and his doctor, *Shortland Street*. 2008.

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Shortland Street is a soap opera that follows the lives of the staff at Shortland Street Hospital. *Shortland Street*'s first episode aired in 1992, and the show continues to run in 2023. According to NZONSCREEN (2020), *Shortland Street* is New Zealand's longest running drama. Gerald Tippett (Figure 7) is a fictional character on *Shortland Street,* and he first appeared in 2007. Through his storyline, viewers are granted insight into his friendships, work life, asexual identity discovery and his marriage.

Gerald is a young male who works as the hospital's receptionist. He is always appearing well-groomed and dressed in stylish suits. He is characterised as a germaphobe[37] and is very emotional. This leads him to be coded as a prudish,[38] yet quirky character. Initially, he is not labelled as homosexual or heterosexual: rather, Gerald is shown to have experimented with both men and women. Bulmer and Izuma (2018:963) note that previous studies have positioned asexuality as the opposite of bisexuality. This understanding of asexuality can be seen here, as the writers conceptualise Gerald as being bi-curious, rather than having a full-scale asexual character. While being textually characterised as experimenting with both men and women, Gerald is predominantly visually characterised as a gay man. This connotative interpretation is also found within others, understanding of Gerald, as throughout the run of the show, other characters constantly state that they thought he was gay.[39] Through his visual appearance, textual characterisation and unclear partner preference, Gerald symbolises stereotypical effeminate masculinity. Effeminate men are portrayed as being linked to stereotypical feminine attributes; they are typecast as being immaculately polished, in the know about the latest fashion trends, and they ensure that they remain attractive to those in their sexual orientation group in order to attract a potential partner. They are also characteristically stereotyped as being sensitive, flamboyant, and emotion-driven 'divas' who are sexually promiscuous. Their counterpart, the hyper-masculine man, is stereotypically depicted as being a strong, athletic, and burly man who pay little attention to mainstream apparel trends but dress in ways that are practical for their lifestyle. Characteristically, these men are typecast as being assertive, work-driven and unemotional.

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[37] During his storyline Gerald visits a psychologist who diagnoses him with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

[38] When Gerald asks his parents to refrain from speaking about sex at his birthday dinner, Gerald's mother tells the attendees that "Gerald's always been a bit prudish."

Gerald's asexual journey begins after he notices a difference in 'libido' between himself and his girlfriend, Morgan, who also works at Shortland Street Hospital. Morgan assures him that she is satisfied with their sex life, but he remains doubtful and decides to visit a doctor (Figure 7). At his appointment, Gerald explains that he is in a great relationship, but he cannot fulfil Morgan's "high sex drive" and needs sexual dysfunction medication. He tells his doctor that there is no underlying physical issue plaguing his interest in sex but "it's more just how often I want to, like I can't really be bothered." His doctor recommends that he consults with a counsellor, and he leaves to go back to work. Heather Mitchell and Gwen Hunnicutt (2019:515), in a study that interviewed ten self-identified asexuals, found that several of their participants only began an asexual self-discovery journey after becoming involved in a relationship and realising that they did not experience sexual attraction or desire. Some participants also reported a lack of anticipation for sexual acts, which led to internalised pathology. One participant said that he knew he was supposed to be interested in having sex with his partner, and this led to his feeling that there must be something wrong with him (Mitchell & Hunnicutt 2019:516). It becomes apparent that Gerald has begun a self-identification that is replicated in asexual theory.

The exchange between Gerald and his doctor stays on his mind, and when a coworker brings up the topic of nuns during their small talk, he wonders what it would be like "to choose a life of celibacy". The coworker replies, stating that celibacy is all about sacrifice. This resonates with him, and he later is seen researching celibacy. Asexual scholars position celibacy in opposition to asexuality; celibacy is described as a choice and a repression of an underlying sexual desire that is not acted on (Scherrer 2008:631). Gerald's research leads him to a discovery that he is not celibate: while reviewing information pertaining to celibacy, a definition of "a distaste or lack of appetite for sex" appears alongside a hyperlink to a webpage on asexuality (Figure 8). It seems as if this definition piques his interest and Gerald clicks on the hyperlink. Following this discovery, he returns to his doctor.

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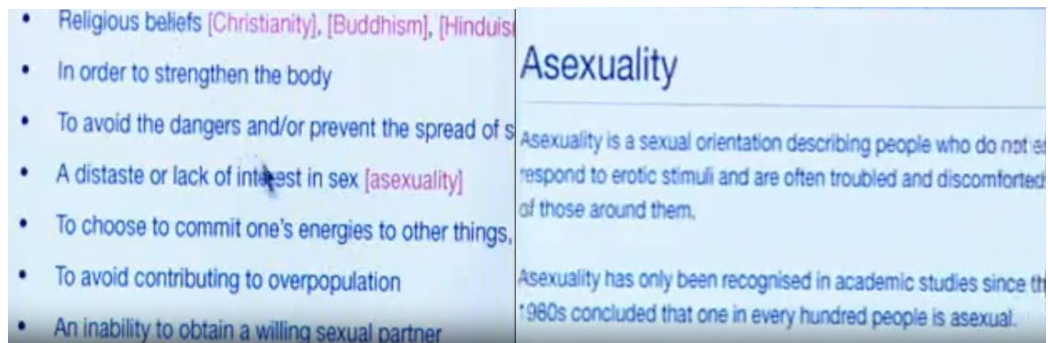
Figure 8: Gerald conducting research on celibacy and asexuality, *Shortland Street*. 2008.

Gerald tells his doctor that he would like to have his blood, specifically his sex hormones, tested, as he believes that he has low sex hormone levels. She agrees to test his blood to rule out any underlying health condition, but for a second time, his doctor suggests that he speaks to a counsellor. He returns later to see if his "sex hormone" results are ready, and he tells her that he knows what is "wrong" with him, stating that "asexuals don't experience sexual desire". Gerald asks for a 'cure' for his asexuality. It becomes clear that despite conducting his own research about asexuality, Gerald still mythicises it. At this point, he does not believe that asexuality is indexical to his assumed lack of interest in sex. This can be due to the 'negatively defined' definition of asexuality that he comes across online: Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2021:164) state that broad definitions of asexuality often label it as a "deficit identity". These definitions focus on what asexual individuals 'lack' and what they are 'missing out on', stigmatising asexuality as something that one 'suffers' from. In his second appointment with his doctor, it is evident that Gerald associates himself with asexuality, but he sees it as something that he is able to recover from. As a consequence of compulsory sexuality, those who do not abide by the myths of sex are marked as "backwards, repressed, insufficiently eroticised and lacking" (Przybylo 2019:2). Many asexuals may internalise acephobic[40] myths that position sexuality as natural, and they believe asexuality to be a sexual deficiency. Catri (2021:1530) maintains that some asexuals decidedly identify similarly, referring to their asexuality as a "lack" of something they are not. Some believe that asexuality is indexical to a "sexuality taken away, a sexuality denied, a sexuality forbidden" (Przybylo 2019:93).

Gerald's doctor also tells him that she has consulted someone who specialises in sexual dysfunctions and mentions that some researchers believe that there is a link between asexuality

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[40] "Ace" is the shortening of the word "asexual". "Acephobia" is prejudicial discrimination towards people on the asexual spectrum.

and hormone levels, while others believe it is simply part of the human condition. This is affirmed by Bogaert (2006:245), who states that people who have a sexual dysfunction disorder do have an underlying sexual orientation despite reporting no attraction, and through interventions such as testosterone treatment, their sexual desire may increase. However, according to Amanda Mollet and Brian Lackman (2018:649), the asexual community resists seeking out a biological explanation for asexuality. Some asexuals dismiss research into the "cause" of asexuality and reject the characterisation of asexuality as a sexual dysfunction, a paraphilia or a symptom of a mental disorder. They feel that this association may lead to further pathology, potentially creating "cure" treatments for asexuality.

Gerald's doctor ends their consultation by positively validating asexuality as a sexual identity: she tells him that many asexuals do not respond to treatment, while other asexual individuals believe that there is nothing wrong with them. His doctor once again recommends that he see a counsellor, but he does not schedule an appointment and instead decides to meet up with Morgan. In line with research on asexual self-identification, Gerald's interaction with the doctor shows that he has started the self-questioning process, attempting to make sense of his lack of interest in sex (Carrigan 2011:473). Gerald's experience with his doctor is in opposition to the case study completed by Alcaire (2021) who conducted an analysis of the ways in which healthcare practitioners in England, Germany, Portugal, and Scotland understand asexuality. Data discovered that healthcare practitioners made jokes about asexuality, reproduced harmful tropes,[41] and overall attempted to discredit asexuality as a sexual orientation. Gerald's initial asexual journey is founded on previous reiterated myths of asexuality that are linked to pathology. Despite this, his doctor encourages him to view asexuality as real identity, one that enriches the lives of many who self-identify as asexual (Robbins *et al* 2016:752).

Robbins *et al* (2016:754) studied the "coming out" stories of 169 self-identified asexuals and found that "many considered asexuality to be a defining identity characteristic and chose to come out as an act of self-expression and a step toward identity integration." Some of their participants felt compelled to come out to their partner in order to develop an "authentic, meaningful relationship". Other participants noted that they were motivated to come out to their partner as a means to negotiate a sexual-asexual relationship. In the same episode of

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[41] According to Alcaire (2021:6), medical practitioners believed that "asexual people were building barriers around themselves" and "were giving too many explanations and justifications about their intimate biography and behaviours". These medical practitioners felt that asexuals "were blocking other possibilities of experiencing life".

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Shortland Street, Morgan and Gerald meet up at a bar, and he nervously says that he has something important to tell her. She assumes that he is going to come out as gay. According to MacNeela and Murphy (2015:803) asexuality lacks social credibility and they state that "most of the time, people find a way to dismiss asexuality so that they can continue to claim that all human beings are fundamentally sexual creatures." A common asexual myth is that asexuals are closeted homosexuals. Some asexuals have shared that their family believed that they were a closeted homosexual before and after they came out as asexual (MacNeela & Murphy 2015:803). Gerald is unconsciously labelled as a gay man throughout the series: his asexuality is socially dismissed and understood as a negative identity throughout his storyline, with some characters denying him his asexual identity altogether and positively associating him as a gay man. Although this frustrates him, Gerald continues to self-identify as an asexual.

After Gerald comes out as asexual, Morgan is initially accepting. This is short-lived as she begins to seek out a reason for his asexuality, and she decides that it is due to his upbringing and potential sexual trauma. Asexual theory reflects Morgan's pathologising asexuality and finds that those who seek out explanations for asexuality often attempt to make a connection between one's asexuality and their relationship with their parents (Alcaire 2021:6). Throughout the series, Morgan pathologises asexuality, stating that there has to be a reason for the "decision" to identify as an asexual. This pathology leads Gerald to associate negatively with asexuality and he tells her that he is "damaged". A common theme across his asexual journey is a sense of guilt: he feels guilty that he is asexual, and he thinks that his asexuality negatively impacts his relationship with Morgan. Their relationship is portrayed as one of sacrifice on Morgan's end. Oftentimes, Morgan attempts to find a reason for his asexuality. She believes that he has chosen to be asexual, and this becomes a regular reason for the pair's breakup.

This is replicated in the lived experiences of asexuals: in a study that investigates the intimate lives of self-identified asexuals, Matt Dawson, Susie Scott and Liz McDonnell (2019:14) find that an unwillingness to have sex whilst in a relationship with a non-asexual lead to conflict, and in some cases, the ending of a relationship. This is not to essentialise the asexual experience, as other asexuals find ways to negotiate relationships "in such a way as to obtain their desired forms of intimacy" while also ensuring that the needs of their partner(s) are met (Dawson *et al* 2019:16). For Gerald, his asexuality is a point of tension that is carried throughout his character's storyline, and does not only affect his relationship with Morgan, but it also impacts his relationship with his parents. Most characters pathologise Gerald and assume

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that there must be something medically to blame for his asexuality. Carroll (2019:11) argues that reducing asexuality to a result of sexual trauma is a misconception. Brotto and Yule (2017:620) state that, previously, asexuality and abuse have been incorrectly linked together, with dismissive statements ranging from asexuality being a manifestation from trauma, a personality disturbance, or a problematic attraction in early life. It is clear that this association is reiterated in *Shortland Street*'s representation of asexuality. Asexuality has shifted away from this classification and is now understood to be a legitimate sexual orientation. By continuously negatively presenting asexuality as a something one suffers from, asexuality remains highly stigmatised.

Following his coming out to Morgan, the pair and two of their friends are invited to a birthday dinner at Gerald's parents' home. It should be noted that Gerald has not come out to anyone else, and this is the first time his parents meet Morgan.[42] His parents are visually depicted as free-spirited, nonconformist individuals: his mother wears loose, earth-toned clothing, and offers their guests homemade organic fruit and vegetable juices and beer. Their home is decorated in sex-themed art and books on the walls and bookshelves (Figure 9). Throughout the visit, the parents openly discuss their sex lives and Gerald's mother writes erotic novels. Gerald is marked by his asexuality when he is around his parents and connotatively, his parents are symbolically Othered in comparison to Gerald.[43] His asexuality, when it is seen in opposition to his parents, allows for pathology, and his parents are portrayed as the norm. The visual and symbolic use of Gerald's parents as the primary signifier of sex is problematic as it makes a mockery of his asexuality. This becomes evident as Gerald's asexuality is 'exposed' to his parents.

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[42] When they arrive, Gerald's mother assumes that his male friend is Morgan as she believed Gerald to be gay. When the misunderstanding is clarified, his mom says she is relieved.
[43] This difference is observed by the guests, who are shocked and visibly uncomfortable when the pair discuss sexual themes.

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Figure 9: Gerald's mother and his friend standing in front of a nude sculpture, *Shortland Street*. 2008.

During a one-on-one discussion with Morgan, Gerald's mother wants to know if she is in a "full and healthy" relationship. Morgan tells her that her and Gerald are taking things slow. His mother is confused, and she begins questioning Morgan about her religious beliefs and whether she is waiting for marriage "before they have a sexual relationship". She also wants to know if their lack of an active sex life is caused by an underlying physical ailment, and at this point, Morgan decides to out Gerald as an asexual. She states that "he decided that he doesn't have sex, doesn't want it, ever." His mother is visibly angered by this. The next scene shows them all eating at the dinner table. They are discussing cancer. Gerald's mother, still visibly upset about her conversation with Morgan, states that cancer is caused by a suppression of emotion, a "suppression of your true self". Morgan takes the hint, voicing that she believes all of them are "true self types of people". The other two guests agree, and the mother shifts her gaze onto Gerald. She decides to confront him about his asexuality: "you being asexual, I don't think that's true. I don't even know how you came to that conclusion." Gerald's father reacts to this information, saying "asexual, as in not sexual? Is there something wrong down below?" At this point it is unclear whether his parents are knowledgeable on asexuality as a sexual orientation, but even if they are, they pathologise his asexuality through reiterated myths of asexuality. These dismissive statements are echoed in stereotypes of asexuality, which assume a reason that explains away asexuality (Van Houdenhove & Gijs 2015:269). Gerald defends himself by telling them that he is perfectly healthy, and he does not believe that this conversation is an appropriate dinner topic.

After a brief topic change, Gerald's parents once again bring up their sex life, stating that "it's okay we talk openly about this." The dinner table is silent, and his mother observes this and directs the conversation towards Gerald and Morgan. She tells them that "it is good for you two to hear this because sometimes we need a push in the right direction, little help from an outside trigger to get you back on track." The parents continue their discussion on tantric sex, and Gerald in frustration pleads that they end their discussion. His mother tells him that they are concerned about his sex life, saying that "sex is the most wonderful thing and I hate thinking of you going without it." Her remark shifts the tone of the conversation into one of pathology and blaming: it seems Gerald is upset and he tells his parents that he blames them for his asexuality. It is apparent that his earlier discussion with Morgan resonated with him, and he has internalised that there must be a 'cause' for his asexuality. He says "if I am missing out on something, if there is something wrong with me, then it's all your fault, because, look at the evidence. Porn on the walls, porn on the bookshelf." Gerald is visibly upset and tells his parents that he does not want to talk about sex anymore. The evening shifts, and Gerald's parents are not accepting of his asexuality. His parents come over the following day to apologise and after some back and forth, Gerald tells them that he is happy to identify as asexual, saying that he likes who he is and if they do not agree with it then they can "lump it". In a later episode, Gerald's mother continues to pathologise his asexuality, even stating that she thinks he has an underlying personality disorder. She tells him that she thinks he may have Asperger's Syndrome and suggests that he visits a psychologist. This upsets him, and he restates that he has not been abused, he is not traumatised, and he does not have Asperger's. He tells her that he is simply asexual and there is nothing wrong with him. This is an important moment in Gerald's asexual journey: despite negative asexual myths being ascribed to him, he explicitly embraces his asexuality as part of himself in front of his parents. He does not see his asexuality as a character flaw. Asexual theory states that many asexuals feel as sense of self-affirmation after they begin to endorse an asexual identity (Robbins *et al* 2016:752). It is evident that Gerald is self-fulfilled by his asexual identity, and he tells Morgan that he can finally come out "loud and proud".

Gerald presumably comes out to his coworkers as following this episode he is symbolically 'labelled' by his asexuality and is often just referred to as the 'asexual'. This asexual 'labelling' negatively impacts the way that Gerald is treated by other characters. Some people spread his asexuality around like it is a gossip topic. In one instance, a man who is interested in Morgan states Gerald is not a "threat" because he is asexual. During another scene, a coworker sees a

shirtless picture of him and tells another coworker that he is a "waste" because he "claims he's asexual". People start pitying Morgan for being in a relationship with an asexual, and they even go so far as to confront Gerald about how unfair this is for her. Asexual theory corresponds with *Shortland Street*'s representation of asexuality. Robbins *et al* (2016:752) maintain that "coming out as asexual may be especially difficult in a society that puts great emphasis on sex and sexuality." Further, Hoffarth *et al* (2016:90) state that due to compulsory sexuality, asexuality is positioned as "an undesirable problem rather than a valid sexual orientation." Vares (2018:526) states that "a lack of public awareness about asexuality combines with the pervasive discourse that all humans have the capacity to have erotic experiences and responses" often means that non-asexuals cannot conceptualise a relationship that does not include sex. As the myths of asexuality play out throughout Gerald's asexual narrative, his relationship with Morgan is labelled as an illegitimate relationship. This is harmful to representations of asexuality as it positions asexuals as incapable of being in a relationship with a non-asexual. This is found within the myth of asexuality that assumes asexual-sexual relationships to be unsuccessful, with non-asexuals finding it too difficult to negotiate a relationship that does not prioritise sex (Dawson *et al* 2019:12).

Gerald's asexuality does not only focus on his isolating experience as an asexual. One of his colleagues, Libby, has been supportive of his asexuality from the beginning. She finds out that there is an asexual support group in the area (Figure 10) and encourages Gerald to attend one of their meetings. The asexual group has ten members, and they meet once a week. They also do frequent adventure activities together. The introduction of the asexual group functions as a signifier of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. The members validate asexuality, and they discuss topics like the asexual coming out process, how it feels to be around other asexuals, and how they sometimes feel envious of non-asexuals. Communities like the one Gerald joins provide spaces for identity formation through support for those who are beginning their asexual journey (Scherrer 2008:637). Carrigan (2011:475) states that the discovery of an asexual community can have a profound effect on asexuals, as these communities facilitate self-clarification and self-acceptance.

Figure 10: Gerald at his first asexual support
group meet-up, *Shortland Street*. 2008.

Gerald meets Jesse, the founder of the asexual group, and Jesse plays an important role in Gerald's asexual identity formation. Jesse is introduced to the audience wearing a t-shirt that says "Extra Virgin" on it (Figure 11). This shirt confuses another character, who assumes that his shirt is in reference to his sexuality and him being a virgin. He explains to her that "Extra Virgin" is actually in reference to the common variety of olive oil. The significance of his shirt indicates a slight shift in *Shortland Street*: there is a new side to asexuality that is not focused on the dominant themes of compulsory sexuality. Through the introduction of other asexuals that are part of the asexual group, asexuality becomes legitimated as a sexual orientation. Although they are background characters that are only seen in a few episodes, their inclusion briefly destigmatises Gerald's asexuality.

Figure 11: Jesse wearing a shirt that reads "Extra Virgin",
Shortland Street. 2008.

During a one-on-one discussion with Jesse, Gerald opens up and tells him that he is confused: he does not know if he is romantically attracted to men or to women. Jesse introduces Gerald to biromanticism, stating that "you can be heteroromantic, homoromantic or biromantic, depending on who you're attracted to." Gerald smiles (Figure 12) after learning about biromanticism and it seems as if this discovery has eased his confusion. Scherrer (2008:631) states that it is often only after asexuals have come across the language of asexuality that they are able to explore different asexual identifications. Jesse encourages Gerald to "own" his asexuality and to be proud of it. He also gifts him with a shirt that says "Asexuals Party Hardest", which can be seen in Figure 13. This t-shirt becomes a symbolic marker for his asexuality; it signifies how he has grown into his asexuality. Gerald is no longer ashamed of his asexuality, he 'wears' it with pride, and he longer allows other characters to delegitimise him.

Figure 12: Gerald smiles after learning about biromantic attraction, *Shortland Street*. 2008.

Figure 13: Gerald wearing a shirt that reads "Asexuals Party Hardest", *Shortland Street*. 2008.

As his characterisation unfolds, his asexual discovery and self-acceptance plays a small role in his overall storyline. His storyline shifts away from asexuality, but he remains negatively labelled as asexual. At one point, Morgan and Gerald decide to get married as Morgan prepares to surrogate her friends' children. This storyline is dynamic and carries on for quite a while, with others concerned about Morgan marrying an asexual. These friends go back and forth about wanting to raise the children that Morgan is carrying after they find out she is pregnant with triplets. Gerald is prepared to be a father and raise the children with Morgan. In the end, the friends raise their children and Morgan and Gerald stay married. Morgan refers to Gerald as her soulmate, and they even discuss having a child together. This causes tension between the pair, as Gerald does not want to have sex with Morgan. The pair separate, and Gerald's storyline ends with him marrying Libby in order for her to get citizenship of New Zealand. Libby accepts his asexuality, and it seems as if they live a happy life together.

Gerald's asexual journey is defined through repeated, negative tropes. His asexuality is merely discussed through reiterations of heteronormativity, and therefore, his asexuality is seen as a character flaw that Others him. He is posited in opposition to his heterosexual counterparts, and this is also visible through his character's physical, visual characteristics. Despite this, Gerald's asexual identity is something that he eventually comes to terms with, and his asexual narrative is often replicated within the stories of other, non-fictional self-identified asexuals. His representation of asexuality is dynamic, and both negative and positive myths of asexuality are visualised throughout the soap opera. Therefore, despite at times being seen through the

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lens of compulsory heterosexual, Gerald Tippett's asexuality is complex, one that challenges heteronormativity not only within his own personal life, but throughout the series.

2.3 Brad from *Faking It* (2014-2016)

Faking It is a comedic television series created by Music Television (MTV). The series focuses on Karma Ashcroft and Amy Raudenfeld, best friends who attend Hester High School. After numerous attempts to become popular, the two friends gain attention after being mistaken as a lesbian couple. In order to maintain their newfound popularity, the pair decide to fake being in a lesbian relationship. The series follows this fake relationship, and the storyline develops when Amy becomes aware of her unrequited romantic attraction to Karma. Amy's stepsister discovers that Karma and Amy are faking their relationship, and the series ends with both girls dating other people (Nicholson 2014). *Faking It* covers a plethora of LGBTQIA+ topics, including queer relationships and identities as Hester High School is includes of many students who form part of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. This includes students that are gay, transgender, polygamous, intersex and asexual. Brad (Figure 14) is a self-identified asexual, and he is a background character who appears in four of the thirty-eight episodes of the series. He is visually coded as an edgy teen: he has an alternative hairstyle, has many piercings, and he dresses in black attire. Connotatively, through his appearance, and his own 'labelling', Brad's appearance is indexical typecast to fit the stereotyped outcast 'goth' trope that is found within the media.
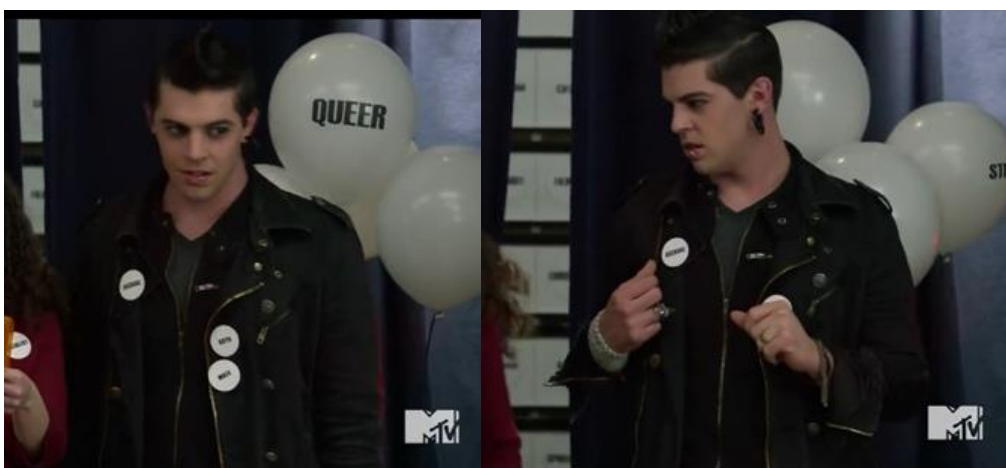
Figure 14: Brad in episode eight season three of *Faking It*, 2016.

Further, his behaviour (Figure 15) in episode thirteen of season two adds to his edgy characterisation: Brad is shown throwing a water bottle at a school security guard, yelling "fuck

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you, narc!" at him for no apparent reason. Brad's behaviour and physical characterisation are portrayed as symbols of rebellion and Othering. His visual and textual Othering indicates that he is 'different' from other characters, and as Osterwald (2017:40) maintains, this is found within other televised asexual representations in order to keep the audience interested in a character who has no interest in sex.

Figure 15: Brad throwing a bottle at the school's security guard, *Faking It*. 2016.

Brad's asexuality is limited to episode eight of season three. Students at Hester High School attend a "diversity ceremony", which is meant to present the diversified student body. This event centres around an "identity booth" (Figure 16) that contains a large number of identifiers printed onto stickers. Students are encouraged to select specific sexual orientations, gender identities and other defining personal labels to wear that represents what they identify with.

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Figure 16: The hosts of the diversity ceremony introducing the identity booth, *Faking It*. 2016.

Brad emerges (Figure 17) from the booth wearing "asexual", "goth" and "male" identifying stickers. When the event's host notices his asexual label, she announces it to the other attendees. The attendees cheer him on. Amy is in attendance, and when she notices him, she suggests that if he is proud of his label, he should "shout it from the rooftop". He is proud of his asexual identity, which is evident when he yells "I'm asexual!" and he is met with encouraging cheers. Through Brad's being present at the "label party" and being able to identify as asexual, asexuality is shown to be a legitimate sexual orientation. This representation of asexuality provides asexuality with visibility amongst other minority identities and orientations; however, this is the only episode where asexuality is mentioned. Brad's asexual story is not expanded on, leaving him to be seen as only the token asexual. As one-dimensional background character, this is the final time that he is seen in the series.

Figure 17: The event's host cheering Brad on for his "asexual" label, *Faking It*. 2016.

Following asexual theory, because he labels himself as an asexual, his awareness of asexuality and the language of asexuality is made apparent and therefore Brad is a self-identified asexual (Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:647; Scherrer 2008:631). Asexuality is mentioned in the series, but the audience is not introduced to its meaning, and therefore the inclusion of asexuality into the series only benefits those who are already aware of the term. The way Brad is presented as a stereotypically closed-off edgy teen, confirms a potential internal feeling that he does not fit into normative society and that he is an outcast. This has been reported by other self-identified asexuals (Mollett & Lackman 2018:626; Carroll 2019:12-13; Rothblum *et al* 2020:761; Catri 2021:1535). However, through his alternative appearance, it is made clear that Brad is singled out as an Other. This conforms to the asexual trope that, in order to keep a character that is shown to be "not sexual" interesting, there has to be one characteristic that draws the viewer's interest.

As a background character, Brad's asexuality and his overall character, are never explored. He is just inserted in order to 'diversify' the series. Unfortunately, as I have previously argued, this is common with minority identities in films and television shows: they are inserted into storylines in order to feed into the hierarchies of heteronormativity. Brad is still Othered and labelled only as an asexual. As has been seen through Karma and Amy's storyline, this series makes use of queerbaiting, initially using lesbianism as a way to "bait" the school into paying attention to the two main characters. By simplifying lesbianism as an identity that heterosexual

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people can adopt in order to enhance their personalities, *Faking It* harmfully delegitimises lesbianism as a sexual orientation. Furthermore, by paying little attention to providing educated portrayals of minority identities, this series contributes to the naturalisation of heterosexuality.

2.4   Beth from *The March Family Letters* (2014-2015)

The March Family Letters is a modern revisioning of Louisa May Alcott's story, *Little Women* (1868). The series follows video diaries created by four sisters, Jo, Amy, Beth and Meg, who create videos for their mother who is deployed overseas. The series focuses on the girls' experiences with "love, loss and struggles into adulthood". (Pemberley Digital 2020; IMDb 2020). According to a question-and-answer session hosted by the producers of the series, Beth is a self-identified asexual. The producers state that each of the main characters have their own social media accounts,[44] and Beth came out as asexual on her Tumblr blog. Beth is characterised as a shy, compassionate introvert. She has no distinct physical characteristics: sitting next to her sister Jo, who has tattoos, Jo is symbolised as alternative. Visually there are no signs that Other her, and connotatively Beth is coded as a reserved young lady.

Figure 18: Beth (beige shirt) speaking to her sister Jo (blue shirt), *The March Family Letters*. 2015.

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[44] These are real-life social media accounts that were created and run by the producers.

In episode thirty-eight, Jo and Beth are discussing Jo's relationship with her romantic interest (Figure 18). Jo changes the subject, enquiring about Beth's 'relationship' with a male named Laurie. Beth is confused and asks her to clarify. Jo keeps trying to make Beth see this male friend as a potential romantic partner. She says that the pair have been spending a lot of time together, and she noticed that Laurie treats Beth differently from everyone else. She also tells her that Beth looked at him in a loving way. Beth replies, reminding Jo that she is "ace". Jo says that just because Beth is asexual does not mean that she is aromantic and does not experience romantic attraction. She continues, stating that, just because Beth does not want to have sex with someone does not necessarily mean that Beth does not want to date them. Beth ends the discussion by stating that she has a brotherly love for her male friend, and Jo asks her if she is certain.

Beth uses the term "ace" which shows that she is familiar with the language of asexuality and has taken on an asexual identity as described by Carrigan (2011:467); Scherrer (2008:631) and Kenney (2020:1). Teut (2019:95) contends that many self-identified asexuals are harassed, and the repeated questioning from Jo could be interpreted as harassment and pressuring towards Beth and the way she views her own asexual identity. Asexuality is a spectrum of identities, including self-identified asexuals who take part in sexual activities, those who participate in romantic relationships, and those who prefer to focus on other aspects of their lives (Bogaert 2006:243; Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:648, 650; Gupta 2017:1001*),* making Beth's asexual identity as well as Jo's idea about asexuality valid.

It is problematic and harmful for Jo to continue to pester Beth about her sexual identity: this imitates phrases that are typically used to dismiss those who "come out" as asexual, such as "you are just a late bloomer", "you have not met the right person yet", "it is just because you are young", "I was like that too when I was younger" and "it is just a phase" (Carrigan 2011:472; Gupta 2017:1000; Robbins *et al* 2016:756; Van Houdenhove & Gijs 2015:269; Yule *et al* 2014a:1; Vares 2018:526-529; Alcaire 2021:6). Furthermore, this discussion sheds light on a trope that is found within asexuality: that everyone has an underlying sexual attraction and asexuals are denying theirs. This trope is due to compulsory heterosexuality, normalising compulsory sexuality and pathologising and Othering those who do not conform to these standards. Compulsory heteronormativity conditions social norms, preplanning the ways in which romantic relationships should be carried out. Nevertheless, Beth's opposite-sex friendship should not need to evolve into a romantic or a sexual one. This sexual assumption

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is dangerous as, in some instances, women and those under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella feel the need to conform to unwanted sexual and romantic advances in order to fit into a heteronormative society.

Overall, the dismissal of asexuality is an unfortunate trope that continues to be shown within representations of asexuality like *The March Family Letters*. Reducing asexuality to merely a temporal descriptive word that holds no power is harmful to those people who identify as asexual. Asexuality can stand on its own as an identifier, and asexuals are valid in not wanting to conform to societal expectations of heteronormativity. Unfortunately, the disregarding of Beth's friendship with someone of the opposite sex is harmful as it reiterates that men and women cannot simply be friends. This mythicises opposite-sex friendships, alluding to these relationships as only existing when sex is involved. In essence, Beth's asexual portrayal reflects the lived experiences of self-identified asexuals: however her representation limits asexuality to previously held stereotypes and assumptions of asexuality as a legitimate sexual identifier.

2.5   Florence Simmons and Steve Morley from *Sex Education* (2019-)

Sex Education is a television series that centres around a teenage boy named Otis Milburn and his sex therapist mother, Jean Milburn. Otis is inspired by his mother's career and opens up an informal sex clinic at his secondary school (Moordale Secondary School) with one of his classmates, Maeve Wiley. The series opens up conversations surrounding teenage life, and explores topics of sexual assault, LGBTQIA+ identities, relationships, safe sex, teenage pressures, self-discovery and acceptance, teen pregnancy and the consequences of drug use. Throughout all three seasons of *Sex Education*, themes surrounding human sexuality and the plethora of ways in which teenagers experience sex is explored in a manner that has the potential to validate situations that the viewers might be experiencing in their personal lives. Typically, each episode revolves around the promotion of compulsory sexuality, suggesting that it is customary for humans, including teenagers, to be sexual and express their sexual desires.

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Figure 19: Florence Simmons during her appointment with Jean in season two episode 4, *Sex Education*. 2020.

Asexuality is mentioned twice, once in season two episode four, and then again in season three episode eight. The representation of asexuality is presented through two students, namely Florence Simmons, who is a background character who goes through an asexual self-discovery, and Steve Morley, who is assumed to be asexual.

Florence (Figure 19) is only highlighted in one episode, namely episode four of season two, so viewers are only visually introduced to her characterisation on one occasion. She has long curly hair that she accessorises with a mustard-yellow beret and the rest of her appearance is not out of the ordinary. There are no signifiers that non-verbally communicate Othering in her appearance. She is written as a shy student who has an interest in acting. In comparison to the rest of the characters in this episode, at a connotative level there are no elements to her physical appearance and characterisation that code her as Other. It should be noted that there are no common behaviours that are connected to asexuality and therefore many asexual individuals "pass" as heterosexual or non-asexual (Robbins *et al* 2016:752; Carroll 2019:9).

Florence's asexual journey begins while playing Juliet in the school's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*. She is called out by a fellow cast member for not portraying chemistry between herself and Romeo. Her friends also chime in, stating that Florence is too picky, and that no boy ever seems to be "her type". She decides to seek advice from the informal sex clinic. After expressing her concerns about the play and how it seems as if the whole cast "is thinking about sex every second of everyday", Otis concludes that Florence is feeling peer pressured to have

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sex. Florence seems to be going through the process of self-questioning; she has begun to notice that she is "different" from her peers who are experiencing levels of sexual attraction. This process is exhibited within the asexual community, with many asexual individuals reporting feeling different from their friends when going through puberty (Bogaert 2006:24; Brotto *et al* 2010:610; Brotto & Yule 2017:620-621; Gupta 2017:966; Carrigan 2011:471). In reply, Florence says: "I don't want to have sex, but sometimes I think I should just do it, so everyone'll shut up and stop making me feel like a freak." At the end of the 'consultation', Otis tells Florence that when she meets the right person, she will be ready for sex. The reactions that Florence gets from her peers mimic dismissive statements that are told to asexuals when discussing how they feel about sex and their own asexual identities. Asexuals are told that they are going through a phase, they are being immature or that the right person will come along, and they will be "cured" (Hoffarth *et al* 2016:90; Pinto 2014:334). The assumption that healthy humans should grow up wanting to be sexual is unrealistic and contributes to the way many non-asexual people dehumanise people on the asexual spectrum.

Not satisfied with Otis' advice, Florence decides to consult the official sex consultant, Jean. She tells Jean that she does not want to have sex at all and mentions that she thinks she might be broken. The feeling of being broken is one that has been repeated in the lived experiences of asexual individuals (Mollet & Lackman 2018:626; Hoffarth *et al* 2016:90). Once one enters a period of self-questioning, Van Houdenhove and Gijs (2015:263) note that an individual tries to make sense of their differences by forming hypothetical explanations for it. This leads to pathologising oneself by speculating that there might be a medical or psychological concern that is holding back an underlying sexual attraction.

Instead of further enabling the pathologisation of Florence's lack of sexual attraction, Jean asks her if she has heard of asexuality. She defines an asexual as "someone who has no sexual attraction to any sex or gender." Although this definition generalises all asexuals as experiencing no sexual attraction, using a definition that is often found when discussing asexuality is helpful for viewers who might be potential asexuals, as well as those who have never heard of asexuality before. Florence assumes that asexuals do not fall in love, and Jean corrects her by explaining that there are some asexuals (romantic asexuals) who seek out romantic relationships, while there are other asexuals (aromantic asexuals) who do not want to be involved romantically. By distinguishing sexual attraction and romantic attraction, and introducing aromanticism, the viewers of *Sex Education* are faced with an alternative to the

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very sexual themes covered throughout the series. Jean ends the conversation with a very important statement: "sexuality is fluid. Sex does not make us whole, and so, how could you ever be broken?" This statement confronts the normativity of compulsory sexuality and allows asexuality to become normalised with all of the other sexual identities that are discussed throughout the show. It should be noted that Florence is only seen in three episodes and does not return to season three, and her storyline has only revolved around her role in the school play and the beginning stages of her asexual identity formation. Her asexuality is not confirmed, and therefore it is assumed that she comes to self-identify as asexual following her introduction to the term.

Figure 20: The first introduction of Steve Morley in season 1 episode 5, *Sex Education*. 2020.

There is another character in the show who is implied to be on the asexual spectrum. Steve Morley (Figure 20) is a student at Moordale Secondary School. He is first introduced in season one episode five, and his character can be seen in all three seasons. Denotatively, Steve is visualised as a young teenager who is muscular. His toned body indexically implies that he looks after his physique and that he exercises frequently. His visualisation presents him as a conventionally attractive teenager, and he is interpreted as a 'jock'. The jock stereotype is used in media and tropifies young, hypermasculine, athletic-bodied men that have an interest in physical activities such as sports. Jocks are stereotypically popular and deemed attractive by other characters. They are also characterised as having a disinterest in academics. There is a

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dichotomy between Steve's characterisation, as he is also coded as a 'nerd'. The nerd trope encompasses young men and women who are portrayed as intellectual, introverted and interested in academic activities. Steve is written as an academic-intellectual who is a member of the school's academic groups, the Aptitude Scheme and the Quiz Heads. He is also textually signified as a nerd through his shyness and lack of social skills. This dichotomy is played out in a scene where Steve is invited over to Aimee Gibbs' home for a "study group". There is no study group and Aimee tells him that one of her friends frequently invites boys over for "study groups" when she thinks that they are "hot". Here it is evident that both his physical appearance as a 'jock' and his textual characterisation as a 'nerd' are understood by other characters. Steve's 'nerdiness' is reiterated in asexual theory: Kristina Gupta (2019:1199-1200) states that some asexual men find commonality in nerd/geek culture spaces. She states that male members of nerd/geek culture "are allowed both to engage in aggressive displays of heterosexuality," while displaying socially awkward behaviours combined with a disinterest in sex. Steve's 'nerd' characterisation and his 'jock' appearance allow him to be written as a complex character.

Throughout the three seasons of the show Steve is dating Aimee and they have a sexual relationship. In season three, episode seven, the students of Moordale Secondary School protest against the school's headmistress and the school board, who wish to rebrand the school as an institution that is not sex focused. The students chant "we are sexual" while wearing signs that describe their sexual identities. Steve is shown sporting a sign that reads "I think I'm demisexual" (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Steve Morley and his "I think I'm demisexual" sign in season three episode seven, *Sex Education*. 2021.

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Demisexual refers to a branch of asexuality, where one is only able to experience sexual attraction after the development of emotional closeness. The text on the sign is understood as anchorage, labelling Steve as an asexual. His demisexual identity is not explored in the last episode of the season, and fans are hopeful that this is not a case of queerbaiting, or in this case, acebaiting (u/aramintasorrows 2021).

Steve and Florence's asexual identities are not explored in the same way that their non-asexual counterparts, are. Both characters exist to aid the development of the main characters' narratives. These are flat portrayals of asexuality that limit the way that asexuality is represented in mainstream media. Viewers of *Sex Education* are only introduced to the term "asexuality", but are not shown how asexual individuals navigate their lives outside their asexual identities.

There is an obvious juxtaposition between the school's non-sexual ideology versus the sexual themes that are played out throughout the lives of the school children. The children are highly sexualised, and each main character explores their own sexuality through their sexual life. However, the power dynamic of heteronormativity comes into question: the school's non-sexual nature is imagined as what is to be perceived as the norm, while the over-sexual nature of the children is Othered. In this sense, traditional understandings of the non-sexual (asexual) versus the sexual (sexuality) are at odds in season three of *Sex Education*. Nevertheless, compulsory sexuality prevails and order is given back to sexuality. It becomes clear that sexual agency is an important message to share with viewers of the show, however, and unfortunately, sexual agency is not equally given to those who identify under the asexual umbrella. The two representations of asexuality fall short in providing complex, well-rounded visual representations of asexuality, leading asexuality to remain a misunderstood, 'uninteresting' characteristic that is used to draw attention to characters, and more importantly, to 'bait' asexual individuals into watching the show with the hope of finding a glimmer of a much-needed representation of asexuality.

2.6   Rue Bennet from *Euphoria* (2019-)

Euphoria (Levinson 2019-) is a television series that follows a group of high school students. The series touches on topics of substance abuse, sex, trauma, self-identification, infidelity, revenge porn and social media. In the second season, Rue Bennett (Figure 22), the protagonist

of the television series, is described as asexual in a scene between her girlfriend Jules Vaughn, and their mutual friend Elliot.

Figure 22: Rue Bennett in season two episode one, *Euphoria*. 2022.

Rue is visually Othered in appearance: while all the other female main characters in the series dress in tight clothing, with full faces of makeup and have their hair and nails done, Rue is visually similar to a tomboy, wearing oversized clothing and not paying much attention to her hair, nails or makeup. Therefore, her appearance symbolically presents androgyny in contrast to her female counterparts. Gupta (2019:1207) interviewed thirty self-identified asexual individuals. She found that a number of female asexual individuals do not dress or act in a certain way because they do not conform to "the expectation that women should present themselves as sexual objects." Rue is narratively characterised as a recovering drug addict who struggles with her mental health, and she experiences molestation by a family member as she is a child. Her storyline signifies the struggles of troubled teenagers living in the twenty-first century. At a connotative level, both her storyline and visual characteristics label her as distinctly less sexual than the rest of the main characters. However, her characterisation does not denote her being asexual.

In season two, episode three Jules asks Elliot if he has a crush on Rue and he says that he does, but he does not think Rue wants to have sex with him. When discussing Rue, he says that "she seems like, gay or asexual, you know, like she's not really interested in sex." Rue is not classified as a lesbian; however, she is only ever seen being romantically involved with Jules.

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Jules is a trans woman, who has been shown to have an interest in both women and men, inherently classifying Jules and Rue's relationship as a queer or 'gay' relationship. Boundaries that are set by the couple with regards to sex or seeking sex outside of their relationship are not made clear to the audience or to Elliot,[45] although it should be noted that some asexuals who are in relationships with non-asexuals are open to their partner(s) seeking sex outside of their relationships (Brotto *et al* 2010:613).

One can speculate that Rue does not want to have sex with Elliot, not because she is asexual, but because she is in a relationship, and she is not sexually attracted to men. Compulsory heterosexuality often stigmatises women who do not want to have sex with men, assuming that all women should be willing sexual partners to the men who are sexually interested in them, and if they are not interested in them, then there must be something wrong with these women. As reported by Gupta (2019:1206), this notion labels all women as heterosexual and removes female sexual agency: this is also something that is commonly found within the lived experiences of female asexuals. Often, this coercive pressure leads women who are queer, asexual or simply not interested, into situations of sexual abuse in order to 'prove' themselves to men.

Returning to the scene, after some back and forth, Jules admits to Elliot that she does not think Rue is a sexual person, and if Rue is, Jules has not seen her sexual side yet. To contradict Jules, in two different scenes in the same episode, Jules and Rue are seen being intimate by kissing and fondling one another. In season two, episode four, Jules performs oral sex on Rue (Figure 23). It is important to note that throughout the two seasons of *Euphoria*, Rue's storyline centres around her substance abuse, and she continues to use drugs throughout both seasons. In season two, Jules is not aware that Rue has relapsed and is doing hard drugs again. Rue tells the audience that she is high during the scene where she is receiving oral sex, saying that she cannot feel a thing that Jules is doing to her. She fakes an orgasm, and Jules notices this. Without knowing that Rue is abusing substances again, Jules may be justified in assuming that Rue might not be a sexual person and could potentially be asexual. Jules' experience as well as these "sexual" moments do not immediately point to Rue being sexual; Van Houdenhove and Gijs (2015:275), in an interview with nine self-identified asexual women, found that six participants engaged in physical intimacy behaviours such as 'French kissing', cuddling and

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[45] In season two, episode four, Jules and Elliot share a few intimate scenes where they kiss behind Rue's back.

caressing. Asexuality is a spectrum orientation that encompasses a multitude of asexual identities, and it is up to each individual to determine what they are and are not comfortable with when it comes to physical intimacy.

Figure 23: Jules performing oral sex on Rue, *Euphoria*. 2022.

Without elaborating further on Rue's sexual identity, and using the term asexual to describe Rue, the writers of *Euphoria* seem to neglect asexuality as a sexual orientation, using the term asexual to define someone who is queer and is not interested in sex with someone of the opposite sex, as well as creating harmful links between asexuality and substance abuse. The creators also bait their asexual fans by mentioning asexuality and alluding to a potential asexual character by not having Rue self-identify as asexual or expanding on her asexuality after episode four. There is no further mention of asexuality during the rest of season two. In short, the representation of asexuality found in *Euphoria* is one that presents asexuality as a symptom of something else: Rue's asexuality is brought up to justify her not wanting to have sex with someone she is not interested in, and is also used to explain a symptom of prolonged substance abuse. Therefore, the decision to label Rue as an asexual is based on "acebaiting" and wanting to appear "progressive". The writers did not take care to expand upon Rue's potential asexuality, nor did they take care to dismiss previously held sexual assumptions. They also neglectfully misinform a large portion of viewers who may be struggling with substance abuse issues and attribute their lack of sexual sensation or interest to an asexual or queer identity, instead of seeking out medical advice.

2.7 Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020)

BoJack Horseman (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020) is an animated adult series that follows the storyline of BoJack Horseman, an anthropomorphic horse. The series follows BoJack's life, as he tries to maintain his fame, struggles with his mental health and substance abuse, and the relationships he has with those around him.

Figure 24: Todd Chavez (left) and BoJack Horseman (right), scene from "BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One" (2014), *BoJack Horseman*. 2014.

Todd Chavez is BoJack's roommate (Figure 24) and he one of the main characters of the series. His character development presents his journey of identifying as asexual, which begins in season four. It is important to note that his storyline is not centred around his asexuality, and asexuality only plays a small part in his complex characterisation. During an 'ask me anything' on Reddit (u/rbwrbw 2019), the creator of the series, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, states that he brought in an asexual consultant to aid in the accurate representation of asexuality from season four onward. Bob-Waksberg says that "looking back, part of what was 'telling me' Todd was asexual was my own preconceived notions of what an asexual person acts like, some of which was based on harmful stereotypes." He says that he "felt it was important to show Todd interacting with other asexual characters and not be the sole (while still being the main) representation of asexuality on our show. We also wanted to make sure Todd could still be Todd and be involved in stories that had nothing to do with his asexuality" (u/rbwrbw 2019).

Todd is a white-presenting male in his mid-twenties. In most episodes, Todd wears a red hoodie, a white t-shirt, black sweatpants, a pair of black flip-flops and a yellow beanie. He is

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also always portrayed with unshaved facial stubble. Visually, Todd does not transgress any visual norms that are traditionally categorised as masculine. In this sense, Todd's appearance is not indexical to asexuality, as his appearance is not stereotyped through desexualised Othering. His laid-back appearance visually symbolises the way that Todd is understood by the other characters in the series: he is not taken seriously and is presented as someone who is not very bright. Throughout the series, on the one hand, Todd is negatively characterised as lazy, oblivious, awkward, unambitious, sloppy, having a low self-esteem and being gay. Przybylo (2019:86) states that asexuals are often negatively portrayed in the media as sad individuals, while Cuthbert (2017:251) argues that asexuality is popularised by negative stereotypes, designating asexuality as an abnormality. On the other hand, Todd is positively characterised as being creative, having patience when it comes to BoJack, coming up with adventurous ideas and acting on them, and being good with children. Most of the time his negative characteristics outshine his positive characteristics, both visually and textually: however, Todd is not presented as an exaggerated Other. His character does not parody the overtly sexual nature of the show; he "blends" in with the rest of the characters. This is mirrored in the lived experiences of some asexuals. Robbins *et al* (2016:752) state that asexuality is not necessarily associated with any behaviours, and many asexual individuals do not feel a pressure to "come out" seeing that asexuality is still stigmatised and is not easily recognised by non-asexual people. Therefore, some asexuals believe that they "pass" as heterosexual (Carroll 2019:9; Mitchell & Hunnicutt 2019:518). In this sense, Todd is not portrayed through any exaggerated characteristics that make him stand out: all of the characters in this series have complex characterisations and visualities, despite their being queer or heterosexual, human or animal.

Throughout the first three seasons of the show, the other main characters are shown having interpersonal relationships with other characters, and these relationships involve romantic and sexual components. Todd is not shown to be romantically or sexually involved with anyone.[46] In the episode "The BoJack Horseman Show" (2016), which is based in the past, the audience is introduced to Emily, Todd's childhood friend. In one of the scenes from the episode, Todd and Emily are situated inside a closet, participating in the game called 'seven minutes in heaven'.[47] Todd is initially reluctant to kiss Emily, telling her that he has never kissed anyone

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[46] In the episode "BoJack Hates the Troops" (2014) Todd has a virtual date with a Japanese woman named Ayako, but their "relationship" ends after 12 hours, with Ayako only wanting money from Todd.

[47] Seven minutes in heaven is a kissing game that is typically played between young teenagers. Two teenagers are paired up and are left alone in a closet or a bedroom for seven minutes, with the assumption that they will spend the time kissing.

before. The pair kiss. According to asexual theory, kissing is common amongst asexuals: Hille *et al* (2020:818) conducted a case study that explores the lives of 1093 people on the asexual spectrum. They discovered that the majority of individuals reported having engaged in kissing and cuddling in the past, with 45.4% of their total sample indicating that they would be interested in kissing in the future. In a later scene, Emily and Todd are shown kissing on Emily's bed. Emily mentions that she thinks it might be time for them to have sex. Todd looks uncomfortable and hesitant (Figures 25 and 26). Figure 25 contains an important visual signifier; throughout the series, Todd rubs the back of his neck whenever he is talking about sex or his sexuality. This action becomes symbolically linked to Todd's outlook on sex and sexual activities. This can be seen in in Figures 25-29.

Figure 25: Todd rubbing the back of his neck, "The BoJack Horseman Show" (2016), *BoJack Horseman*. 2016.

Figure 26: Todd rubbing the back of his neck, "Love and/or Marriage" (2016), *BoJack Horseman*. 2016.

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Figure 27: Todd rubbing the back of his neck, "That Went Well" (2016), *BoJack Horseman*. 2016.

Figure 28: Todd rubbing his neck, "Stupid Piece of Sh*t" (2017), *BoJack Horseman*. 2017.

Figure 29: Todd rubbing his neck, "What Time is it Right Now" (2017), *BoJack Horseman*. 2017.

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Todd begins a self-questioning process in the last episode of season three "That Went Well" (2016). Todd asks Emily out on a date, and strangely, Emily proceeds to question Todd's sexuality and whether he is gay. Todd uncomfortably replies while rubbing his neck (Figure 27 and Figure 30), saying "I'm not gay. I mean, I don't think I am, but… I don't think I'm straight either. I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing." Todd's statement is significant; it replicates the way many potential asexuals feel before coming across asexuality. Todd comes to a realisation that he does not fit into a traditional heterosexual identity. Robbins *et al* (2016:757-758) state that "models of homosexual identity development typically begin with a stage that is marked by a latent perception of being different from heterosexual peers, called 'identity confusion'". Dawson *et al* (2019) interviewed asexual individuals and were concerned with the different ways in which asexual people understood their asexual identity. They found that some of their participants had a sense of being inherently different from their peers. Asexuality is also often stereotyped as denying one's true sexual orientation, which may be a heterosexual or homosexual identity (Pinto 2014:334). By accurately portraying the first step of coming to an asexual identity, Todd's characterisation validates self-identified asexuals, all the while giving insight into how an asexual identity comes to formation. Todd becomes a symbol of asexual validation before the term "asexual" is even introduced to the audience.

Figure 30: Todd and Emily at a restaurant, "That Went Well" (2016), *BoJack Horseman*. 2016.

In the episode "See Mr. Peanutbutter Run" (2017), Emily tells Todd that she does not want to date him because she wants a boyfriend who is not asexual. Todd seems confused, asking her why she would call him that. It appears that he believes that asexuality is something negative. Emily reassures Todd by saying that she supports him, and that labelling can be helpful for

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some people. The introduction of the term asexuality is important: it creates visibility for the asexual community and creates a space for asexual exposure. However, failing to define asexuality at the initial introduction of the term does not aid in spreading what asexuality is to those who have never heard of the term before. This initial introduction of asexuality also fails to provide insight into Todd's journey after finding out about the term. The audience is not given insight into his experience with sexual attraction, why he connects with the term, and it is not clear whether he conducts further research on asexuality. All that follows is that Todd identifies as an asexual, and he decides to come out to BoJack in episode "Hooray! Todd Episode" (2017).

Todd tells BoJack that he thinks that he is asexual and defines asexual as being "not sexual". After coming out as an asexual, Todd expects BoJack to think that asexuality is weird, but BoJack reassures him by saying that he thinks it is amazing. Todd proudly smiles and says "it actually feels nice to finally say it out loud. I am an asexual person. I am asexual" (Figure 31). Adopting an asexual identity has been described as a moment of positive self-affirmation and liberation (Carrigan 2011:475; Scherrer 2008:630-631; Robbins, Graff Low & Query 2016:754). However, this initial explanation of asexuality is limited and fails to provide valuable insight into asexuality as an identifier and a spectrum. Nevertheless, Todd becomes a visual symbol of asexuality: he is not written as a repetition of other depictions of asexuals, who are tropified as distressed and confused individuals. After being labelled an asexual, Todd takes on asexuality and is proud of his new asexual identity.

With the plethora of definitions for asexuality, which is often defined according to one's personal asexual experience, it is understandable that the writers would provide a simplified, general and comprehensible definition. This definition of asexuality has the potential to resonate with a large portion of the *BoJack Horseman* audience, many of whom might be secure in their heterosexual or queer identity, but may experience a level of being "not sexual". Rothblum *et al* (2019:91) conducted a case study that looked at the interpersonal lives of twenty-seven asexual individuals living in the United States and Canada. Two participants mentioned Todd's asexuality, and how it was the first time that they came across a positive and relatable characterisation of asexuality.

Figure 31: Todd tells BoJack that he identifies as asexual, "Hooray! Todd Episode" (2017), *BoJack Horseman*. 2017.

Throughout the series, the asexual community plays a vital part in Todd's storyline. He is shown to attend two asexual meetings (Figure 32 and 33). The participants of these meetings vary in appearance, providing a wide variety of visual portrayals of asexuality. At the meetings, the sign that is hung up is decorated in the colours of the asexual flag (Figure 34).[48]

Figure 32: Todd at his first asexual meet-up, "Hooray! Todd Episode" (2017), *BoJack Horseman*. 2017.

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[48] The asexual flag comprises four colours: black represents asexuality, grey represents grey-asexuality and demisexuality, white represents non-asexual partners and allies, and the purple represents community (University of Northern Colorado 2022).

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Figure 33: Todd at his second asexual meet-up, "Stupid Piece of Sh*t" (2017),
BoJack Horseman. 2017.

In episode "Ancient History" (2018) Emily is still in Todd's life, and as an ally, decides to create an asexual-only dating application, intertextually makes use of the asexual flag (Figure 34) colour-scheme (Figure 35). Online and offline asexual communities play an important role in the lives of asexual individuals. These communities bring together individuals with similar life experiences, creating a space for individuals to validate themselves and their feelings (Cowan & LeBlanc 2018:39; Lagerkvist 2014:206). Members of asexual communities are introduced to other asexual individuals, providing them with a sense of community (Yule *et al* 2014a:2). It might not be common knowledge that these online and offline communities exist, and by portraying them visually, the series could lead to potential and self-identified asexuals seeking out these communities for themselves in their own lives.

Figure 34: The asexual flag, University
of Northern Colorado (2022).

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Figure 35: The asexual dating app Emily created for Todd, "Ancient History" (2018), *BoJack Horseman*. 2018.

At one of these asexual meetings, the members discuss marriage. Todd is confused and tells them he knows that it is "pretty wild for an asexual to get married," but one of the members interrupts him and tells him that she is married to an anthropomorphic anteater (Figure 33). She comforts Todd by explaining that "asexual just means that you're not interested in sex." Scherrer (2010:63-64) conducted a study that looked at the relationships of 102 asexual individuals. The study found that seventeen participants described themselves as being in a partnership or marriage, describing their ideal relationship as "dyadic, monogamous partnerships". The 2019 Asexual Community Survey (Weis *et al* 2021:42) found that 6.4% of the respondents were currently engaged or married. As a spectrum-based orientation, asexuality does not dictate the way individuals expand on their chosen relationships. Asexuals who are romantically inclined seek out romantic relationships that are similar to non-asexual romantic relationships, and this can mean that for some romantic asexuals, marriage is something that they desire. By informationally elaborating on asexuality, the show creates a space where individuals can begin to question their own relationships and sexual/romantic identities. Furthermore, Todd's exploration of asexuality, as well as the expanding of asexuality and its communities, provides for a complex, nuanced look into how asexuality is portrayed through television representations. Thus far, the portrayal of asexuality that I have discussed opens up different ways of being that are not limited to asexuals. Through the visual and symbolic usage of Todd as the primary signifier of asexuality, some might come across his storyline and re-

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evaluate their own life-experiences and might feel validation in their own life choices. Even for those who are not asexual, Todd's portrayal and asexual storyline give insight into alternative conceptions of relationships, partnerships and kinship that do not conform to traditional heteronormativity.

In season four, another asexual character is explored. Todd meets up with an anthropomorphic axolotl[49] named Yolanda (see Figure 29). She asks him out, and Todd proceeds to rub the back of his neck and immediately comes out as asexual. Surprisingly, she too is asexual. The pair begin dating. This pairing is something that is not often shown within asexual storylines: as my analyses have so far shown, asexuals are typically paired with a sexual partner, and this is often done to build up an interesting juxtaposition between the sexual and the non-sexual. Typically, asexual-and-sexual relationships are filled with communication and navigation, often leading to conflict and compromise. This, however, is intended to keep the viewers interested in asexuality.

Despite being asexual, Yolanda's asexual identity is not elaborated on, but it is assumed that she is a romantic asexual. In the episode "Planned Obsolescence" (2018), Todd meets Yolanda's family. She warns Todd that she has not told them that she is asexual and asks Todd to pretend that they are in a sexual relationship. When Todd arrives at Yolanda's parents' house, he realises why she may be hesitant to come out to her family: Yolanda's father is an erotic novelist, her mother is an adult film star, and her twin sister is a sex advice columnist. During their dinner, Yolanda's mother and father insist that the couple stays the night to "make love" in their home. The mother says that she cannot think of any reason why they would not want to have sex there, unless they do not enjoy sex. The dynamic between Todd and Yolanda's family is diametrically opposite: Todd is portrayed as desexualised and Othered in comparison to Yolanda's family who are hypersexualised and are the norm.

Burdock (2018:55) introduces an asexual trope in his examination of a sample of Alfred Hitchcock's films. This trope pits a hypersexualised character against a desexualised character: the hypersexualised and the desexualised characters are depicted as polar opposites that emphasise sexual deviance. In the simplest of forms, both asexuality and hypersexuality are

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[49] It should be noted that in some asexual spaces, the axolotl is used as a symbol for asexuality (u/pipmerigold 2020; AVEN 2017b; Asexual Axolotl 2012).

ideologically understood as two extremes. Yolanda and Todd are written as desexualised characters who are contrasted against Yolanda's family, who are characterised as hypersexualised. This trope contends that it is not interesting for a couple to just be asexual: there needs to be an element of sexuality, one of heterosexuality that is reflected in current and historical society, in order for the viewer to "buy" into asexuality. In this sense, this trope may also resemble the way that many asexual individuals feel when living in a postmodern heteronormative sexusociety. In Figure 36, visual and symbolic use of the phallic objects in the bedroom, the colour scheme and the robe lying on the floor are contrasted with Todd's shocked facial expression and body language. As a young man with no visual abnormalities, this image of Todd is quite striking. Todd's body becomes the primary signifier of the asexual in a 'sexusociety', personifying the sense of dissimilarity asexual individuals experience.

Figure 36: Todd entering Yolanda's mother's bedroom, "Planned Obsolescence" (2018), *BoJack Horseman*. 2018.

To add onto the sexualised nature of Yolanda's family, they spend the rest of the evening attempting to prove that Todd is not a sexual person. In one scene (Figure 36), Yolanda's mother drops her robe in front of Todd. Todd seems embarrassed for her, but he does not become shy, or show any signs that he is sexually attracted to her. She tells Todd that she knew he was not a sexual person, because "any ordinary man would be madly aroused by the body that starred in every single porn version of a John Hughes movie." She ends up assuming that Todd is asexual and begins to fetishise Todd's asexuality. Yolanda's mother's actions are harmful as they disparage and Other asexual men as an illegitimate identifier. The

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representation of Yolanda's mother may be used to caricature and criticise the types of negative responses that non-asexuals have to asexual people. Within a heteronormative society, men are expected to be sexually dominant. In a study that explores the intersections between gender and asexuality, Gupta (2019:1205) found that asexual men reported that masculine heteronormative roles led to issues with non-asexual women. One participant reported that women would become angry with him as a result of his asexuality. Yolanda's mother's asexual prejudice dehumanises male asexuals, while, at the same time treating Todd as an object of desire. This is ironic, as she tells Todd that she is tired of the world thinking of her as a sex object. Up to this point, without providing an explanation that some asexual individuals do participate in sexual activities, the audience is left thinking that asexuality is something to be stigmatised. Positioning asexual individuals as being devoid of any type of sexual agency, while objectifying them, creates an ideology that dehumanises all asexual identities. Compulsory heterosexuality promotes a sense of sexual desire and lust between a younger male and an older, attractive female. Heterosexuality has plastered this fantasy across the histories of mass media. Todd's portrayal demystifies this, and he highlights the oppressive powers that are at play during situations such as depicted in Figure 23. A person's asexuality is not another person's sexual conquest: asexual people have reported experiencing societal and individual pressures and have consensually and non-consensually participated in sexual activities with non-asexual partners (Brotto *et al* 2010:612; Gupta 2019:1207-1208; Vares 2018:521; Carroll 2019:17).

Later, in another episode, asexuality's broad nature is expanded on during a conversation between Yolanda, Todd, Emily and her boyfriend. In the episode "The Light Bulb Scene" (2018), Yolanda states that not all asexuals are aromantic. Todd explains that one can either be A. romantic or B. aromantic, while also being A. sexual or B. asexual. Todd describes himself as AB: romantic asexual. He also mentions that asexuals make up one percent of the population. His explanation of the spectrum of asexuality provides a sufficient starting point for those who have never heard of asexuality, and he makes use of asexual terminology that can easily be found online if a viewer decides to do so. His asexual population statistic is one that is debated by asexual theorists, asexual advocates, and asexual communities.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a statistic assists towards legitimising asexuality amongst the general public. Todd also mentions that without an asexual-only dating app, "asexual romantics might end up settling for just whatever other asexual romantics they might meet, even if they

have nothing in common", alluding to his relationship with Yolanda. Across the asexual spectrum, asexuals couple with non-asexuals and other asexuals, and they are not limited to only dating other asexuals. Those who partner with non-asexual individuals have to negotiate boundaries surrounding sexual activities, while those in relationships with other asexuals are presumed to have little to no negotiation regarding sexual activities (Brotto *et al* 2010:612). If a romantic asexual is sex-averse and does not want to participate in any sexual activities, it can be assumed that they would prefer to be in a relationship with a fellow asexual. Todd is therefore not incorrect in his assumption that asexual romantics might settle into relationships with each other for convenience's sake. The creation of asexual-only dating websites and applications is not uncommon; there are websites such as www.asexualitic.com,[50] www.asexualcupid.com[51] and www.asexuals.net,[52] which exclusively cater to people on the asexual spectrum. Through a deeper exploration of asexuality, the asexual community, and asexual spaces, the general public is introduced to the multidimensional status of asexuality: asexuality is not just a word, but it is an orientation that is applied to the lives of everyday individuals. It is not bound to one experience, nor is it written as fiction; asexuality is replicated in the real world. Unlike other asexual representations discussed in the chapter, the ones found within *BoJack Horseman* are educational, complex and everywhere.

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[50] Asexualitic.com is described as the "first community and dating site" for asexual people.
[51] Asexualcupid.com is a dating site that is for people who "lack sexual attraction to anyone, or low absent interest in sexual activity". The site differentiates between asexuality and celibacy and provides a glossary of the romantic orientations that can be found throughout its members.
[52] Asexuals.net is a website where asexual individuals can make asexual friends and discover other people on the asexual spectrum.

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Figure 37: Emily, Todd and the sex robot, "Ancient History" (2018), *BoJack Horseman*.
2018.

Emily and Todd reunite in "Ancient History" (2018). Both are single, and they reminisce about their past relationships. Emily tells Todd that he was the best boyfriend that she ever had, and that she wishes that there was a version of Todd that she could have sex with. Later in the episode, Todd gifts Emily with a sex robot (named Henry Fondle) that he created for her (Figure 37).

He believes that the sex robot will make Emily want to date him again. He tells her: "I guess I just thought, you waste so much time with these boring firemen just for the sex, maybe, I figured if you had some other way to satisfy yourself sexually then you could spend more time with me." Todd is attempting to negotiate a non-monogamous relationship with Emily. Carroll (2019:17) maintains that some asexuals "report negotiating non-monogamous relationships with their non-asexual partners, often with the condition that their emotional relationship remains closed." Emily declines Todd's offer and mentions that while she was setting up the asexual dating app, she discovered that there are some asexual people who do have sex. She wonders if Todd would be willing to do that for her. Asexual theory shows that there are asexual individuals who are willing to have sex in certain contexts (Carrigan 2011:649). Brotto *et al* (2010:07) discovered that, in their case study of 187 self-identified asexuals, 25% engaged in sexual intercourse despite not experiencing sexual attraction. Many asexuals mentioned that they participated in sexual activities to make their partner(s) happy, to procreate, to release

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tension, to "pass" as sexual, to benefit their relationships, and some mentioned partaking in sex due to societal pressures (Catri 2021:1535; Bulmer & Izuma 2018:963; Lund & Johnson 2015:124; Vares 2018:521; Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021:172). Sexual activity and behaviours declared by self-identified asexuals varied and personal experiences (Carroll 2019:6). Therefore, this narrative is closely related to what some self-identified asexuals experience. It should be noted that, as stated by Todd himself, he is "not sexual" and defines himself as a romantic asexual. When looking back at the portrayals of his past relationships, despite kissing, there has been no indication that Todd has ever been interested in the act of sex, nor has it been shown that Todd would have sex as a compromise.

Again, in Figure 37, Todd is visually symbolised as asexuality personified within a heteronormative society. Asexuals may experience, understand and interpret concepts such as sexual desire, sexual arousal and masturbation differently from sexual people (Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:650, Bogaert 2006:244; Scherrer 2008:628; Przybylo 2019:27; Dawson *et al* 2016:349; Dawson *et al* 2019:19; Mitchell & Hunnicutt 2019:510; Robbins *et al* 2016:752). This is neither a negative nor positive depiction of asexuality: it is a realistic one. In certain situations, asexual individuals do see sex differently from their sexual counterparts. Through sexually suggestive phrases and a variety of sex toys, Henry Fondle becomes a caricature for the stereotyped way that asexual individuals understand sex. Todd understands sex only as a physical act and he does not acknowledge the emotional and intimate side of sex. Despite attempting to renew his relationship with Emily, he is depicted as being clueless to how the sexual world works. Nevertheless, it becomes clear Todd has made attempts to try to understand the 'sexual side'. He navigates the world through an asexual lens, and although he tries to compromise in his own ways, Todd eventually comes to terms with his asexuality and what that means for his dating life.

Figure 38: Todd and Maude sitting on the couch, "Xerox of a Xerox" (2020), *BoJack Horseman*. 2020.

In the season finale of season five, BoJack overhears a conversation with an anthropomorphic rabbit named Maude (Figure 38), who works as a barista. She is having a conversation with a guy that she is assumed to be dating. He implies that she did not want to have sex with him during their relationship, and he keeps asking her if it is a "Jesus thing". After witnessing this, BoJack confronts her, also questioning whether her reason for not wanting to have sex is due to her religion. She denies this, and that is when BoJack tells her about the asexual dating app. Yule *et al* (2014a:1) discuss pervasive stereotypes that surround asexuality as a sexual orientation. They mention the stereotype that tropifies asexual people as being highly religious, and therefore abstaining from sex. Religious celibacy, and celibacy in general, is a choice; identifying as asexual is a valid sexual identity that is indicative of one's personal preferences. Being celibate means that one recognises that they experience sexual attraction but decides not to act on it for personal reasons. Those who are celibate, much like those who suffer from sexual dysfunction disorders, have underlying sexual orientations, and therefore are assumed to eventually act on their underlying sexual attraction. To add to this, there are asexuals who do have sex, and therefore it is through a heteronormative lens that one reduces not engaging in sexuality to a religious, political or medical "choice".

In "Intermediate Scene Studies w/ BoJack Horseman" (2020), Todd and Maude begin dating. This relationship is different from his previous relationship with another asexual: the two seem to get along very well as they have similar personalities. In episode "Xerox of a Xerox" (2018) Todd and Maude decide to move in together. The series ends with Todd and Maude remaining

happily together. Todd has a new job as a daytime children's caretaker, while Maude continues to work as a barista. Their relationship is not explored, so it is uncertain whether the pair remain together. However, this representation of a successful asexual-and-asexual relationship is important not only for asexuality but for sexuality as a whole. This relationship shows that, despite failed relationships, there is the potential to find a partnership that suits all parties' desires and needs. Furthermore, this relationship shows the viewers that a relationship, whether it is asexual-and-asexual or asexual-and-sexual or even sexual-and-sexual, can thrive without the need to conform to compulsory heterosexuality. Relationships do all look the same and they do not all have the same end goal; in the case of Todd and Maude, there is no mention of a marriage or even children. In the end, this relationship was the best outcome for Todd's asexual representation as he lives a life that is not centred around his asexuality or his lack of sexuality, but presents him as an equal amongst the show's heterosexual characters.

2.8   Conclusion

Each character who has been discussed in this chapter have been critiqued according to their positive and negative portrayals of asexuality. Asexuality remains, for the most part, pathologised, misunderstood and limited to a 'quirky' personality flaw. Gerald's asexuality is pathologised, initially leaving the audience of the series to believe that asexuality is something to be 'cured'. His visual appearance is also negatively tropified: he is depicted as a non-intimidating 'asexual' effeminate, assumed to be gay man, and this Others him in comparison to his sexual counterparts. At one point, his asexuality becomes an issue for those around him, and they pathologise him, pleading that he must change his ways and 'work through' his asexuality. This portrayal does a disservice to asexuality: asexuality remains highly stigmatised and is not recognised as a legitimate sexual orientation. Gerald's asexuality is initially seen as temporary, and during this time, his entire narrative revolves around his asexuality and how it is detrimental to his happiness and overall life. Through these negative associations, Gerald's asexual identity plays into myths of asexuality.

Brad is visually stereotyped as an asexual. He is Othered by his appearance, and therefore he is depicted as an outcast. This is found in his behaviours, as he is depicted as being rebellious. Brad's asexuality is never discussed, and he is simply seen as the "asexual". Therefore, it is fair to say that Brad is a one-dimensional character. He is only found in four episodes, and his asexual narrative is never explored. Brad is merely labelled as an asexual, and this can allude

to acebaiting. Looking at the little care taken to preserve lesbianism as a valid sexual orientation, it is clear that minority sexualities are added into *Faking It* (2014-2016) in order to promote compulsory heterosexuality, while actively working towards delegitimising and dismissing marginalised sexual identifiers.

Like Brad and Gerald, Beth is also visually stereotyped as an asexual. Beth is Othered due to her 'flat' visual representation: unlike Brad, and similarly to Gerald, Beth is portrayed to be a 'prude'. This becomes clear through her visual opposition to her sister, Jo. Her asexuality is portrayed as a mere label and is not taken seriously by her sister. Asexuality in this representation, is seen as something to be challenged: her sister's pressure is borderline harassment and is something that is replicated in the lives of other asexual individuals. Her opposite-sex friendship is delegitimised by her sister, and compulsory heterosexuality plays a part in her sister's ideas surrounding relating to the opposite sex. Negatively, it is reiterated that there is no possible existence of a male-and-female friendship without its being part of an overall sexual and romantic relationship. Beth's asexuality is only spoken about in one episode, and therefore, her asexuality is one-dimensional.

In both *Sex Education* (2019-) and *Euphoria* (2019), despite the introduction of asexuality as a sexual identity, asexuality never develops into a lived sexual identity, but more of a way for these series to seem progressive and relatable. Throughout *Sex Education*, the asexual characters seem to have asexuality added as character traits, as both Steve and Florence are one-dimensional supporting characters. *Sex Education* (2019-) makes use of asexuality in two instances, however both instances merely make use of asexuality to add to each episode's storyline. *Euphoria* represents asexuality as Other: Rue is Othered in appearance. Like Brad, Rue's asexuality seems to be 'pinned' to her with no explanation of what asexuality is. Rue's queer relationship is ignored and pushed aside to privilege heterosexuality. When her asexuality is not being used to legitimate compulsory heterosexuality, it is being used to justify the symptoms of prolonged substance abuse. Therefore, for the asexual representation found within *Euphoria,* asexuality is just a meaningless term used to explain other, non-related issues that are found throughout the series. In both *Sexual Education* (Steve) and *Euphoria,* asexual lexicon such as 'ace' and 'demisexual' are introduced into the series without expanding upon what these words mean for these character's storylines. It can be argued that asexual individuals are baited into watching these programmes with the hopes of finding commonality with the "asexual" character/s, or even finding a dynamic asexual character at all.

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It should be said that the representations of asexuality found within this chapter are not strictly negative: there are aspects in each character that provide positive, realistic and different ways of seeing and understanding asexuality. Gerald eventually comes to accept his asexual identity, and his storyline moves away from only focusing on his asexuality. The inclusion of the asexual support group, alongside support shown by Gerald's doctor and Libby can aid in the destigmatisation of asexuality. Gerald's dynamic asexual self-discovery journey may assist non-asexuals with becoming familiar with the asexual spectrum. In *Faking It* (2014-2016), the fact that asexuality is present at the label party aids the legitimisation of asexuality in contemporary media. The discussion between Beth and Jo, although filled with reiterated stigmatising statements, works towards presenting potential outcomes for other asexuals who have to have similar conversations with non-asexuals. As a self-identified asexual, Beth uses asexual terminology which is useful for those who are coming across the term for the first time. Beth is also persistent and ensures that her voice is heard, ensuring that her asexual identity remains validated. *Sex Education's* (2019-) inclusion of asexuality is important asexual representation as it provides the audience with a brief understanding of what asexuality entails, while *Euphoria* (2019-), although providing a very shallow introduction to what asexuality is not, has the potential to address asexuality in later seasons of the series.

These representations of asexuality, although at times limiting and reiterations of historical tropes, are vital to the ongoing fight to destigmatise asexuality. These representations offer different audiences from different backgrounds with some insight into asexuality. This does not mean that every viewer will immediately be accurately educated on asexuality, but it does mean that those who seek validation through the media might come to a sense of acceptance, even by hearing or reading the word "asexuality". These sometimes-flawed representations of asexuality nonetheless contribute to presentation of asexuality's dynamic nature, and their drastically different appearances and visualisation, time periods, storylines, places of origin, overall accessibility avoid limiting asexuality to one type of representation.

BoJack Horseman (2014-2020) diversifies the way asexuality has been portrayed in the media. This series focuses not only on asexuality but pays special attention to ensure that asexuality runs throughout the series. A nuanced way of representing asexuality within the series is having three different asexual characters, one a main character in the background, as well as a plethora of other asexual characters, that work together to represent the spectrum of asexuality visually.

In this sense asexuality is not limited to one experience. Although Yolanda and Maude are seen as accessories to Todd's overall storyline, neither of their characterisations revolves around their asexuality. These secondary characters have unique visual characteristics and personality traits that are complementary to other secondary characters. Despite being secondary characters and forming part of the portrayal of Todd's dating history, these characters, including the heterosexual Emily, different perspectives on relating as an asexual.

An interesting and important thing to note is that Todd is seen as the main representation of asexuality. Despite mainstream media making more use of minority populations as main characters, having Todd, a white man, as the face of asexuality is important within the context of *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). As noted throughout the analysis, the series focuses on a fictional world where humans and anthropomorphic animals live together. It would be detrimental to the validation of asexuality if, for instance, Yolanda the axolotl were the main representation of asexuality. MacInnis and Hodson (2012:732-738) have discussed that members of the public have denied asexuals uniquely human emotions. In their study they found that asexuals were dehumanised and were regarded as animalistic and machine-like by non-asexuals. By portraying asexuality only through anthropomorphic animals, asexuality would be seen as a fictitious, delegitimate identity. This would have allowed asexuals to further be mythicised as animalistic beings, devoid of human feelings, and people who should be othered and objectified. Furthermore, having Todd be a male and not a female reduces the potential for destigmatising and delegitimising of asexuality as a sexual orientation. Simply put, the only thing 'different' about Todd is his asexuality, and therefore, his male identity allows his asexuality to be accepted amongst ideas surrounding compulsory heteronormativity.

The representations of asexuality found within *BoJack Horseman*, as well as the overall implementation of asexuality throughout the series, allows for well-rounded, complex visual examples of asexuality in mainstream visual culture. Through visual and semiotic imagery, the manner in which asexuality is discussed throughout the series provides sufficient guidelines toward understanding the multidimensional nature of asexuality. The asexual spectrum is validated throughout the series. Furthermore, the asexual narratives that are found within the series are not limited to asexuality: they expose different ways of being, ways that can be found, understood and implemented in non-asexual lifestyles.

Despite repeated tropes found within asexuality's history, a diversity of visual representations of asexuality is readily available to be explored. Negative, one-dimensional portrayals of asexuality still exist in modern times, but despite this, writers and producers continue to contribute to the acceptance, legitimisation and education of asexuality in the mass media, specifically via television characters.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSES OF ASEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

3.1   Introduction

Social media has evolved into playing a vital role in the construction and presentation of the online (and offline) persona. Israel Márquez, Debora Lanzeni and Maria-José Masanet (2023:907-908) state that "users curate their digital identity by selecting not only the content they want to share but also deciding who they share it with". Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms, proudly stating that they help over one billion people create and share on their platform (Instagram 2023). Users are encouraged to upload digital photographs, videos and visuals onto their personal and 'brand' Instagram accounts. A key component of the popularity of Instagram is the selfie.[53] Selfies have become a powerful way for individuals to express and establish themselves in the visual world. Márquez *et al* (2023:914) explain that the selfie allows individuals to present themselves in the way they see themselves and the way they wish to be seen. Through this practice of self-presentation, users are able to find other like-minded accounts and communities (Murray 2015:497).

This chapter seeks to critique representations of asexuality found on the social media platforms Twitter and Instagram. This chapter engages with two types of representations of asexuality, namely the representation of an asexual public persona by public figures, and the self-representations of asexuality.

I explore the representation of an asexual persona by public figures by analysing: Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit on Instagram and Twitter), Venus Envy (@VenusEnvyDrag on Twitter and @venusenvydrag on Instagram) and Michelle Lin (a post that is found on @LGBT's Instagram page). The analysis consists of a two-tiered critique. The first tier consists of a semiotic and hermeneutic analysis that is informed by asexual theory and queer theory. This tier critiques the visual and textual coding of each asexual representation. Secondly, the responses from other users are investigated and substantiated using academic theory.

In terms of the self-representations of asexuality, I analyse images from Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram). This section of the chapter sets out to explore the

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[53] *The Oxford English Dictionary* introduced the word "selfie" to its 2013 edition, defining it as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." (Oxford University Press 2013)

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ways in which asexuals self-represent in a digital space. These self-representations of asexuality are initially investigated by means of semiotics and hermeneutics to analyse symbols and heterosexual myths of asexuality. Through the investigation of the Instagram page, three recurrent tropes constituting self-representations of asexuality have been identified. These findings are further critiqued using asexual theory and queer theory.

3.2   Public personas of asexuality

According to Phillip Ayoub, Douglas Page and Sam Whitt (2021:469), LGBTQIA+ advocacy activities such as drag shows, Pride events and LGBTQIA+ activism are commonly believed to promote recognition and a shift in cultural perceptions of LGBTQIA+ identities. Drag performers are often understood to be LGBTQIA+ advocates (Schmid & Payam 2023:2180) and are regarded as important for normalising LGBTQIA+ themes through entertainment. Further, LGBTQIA+ activists, such as LGBTQIA+ online content creators, aim to legitimise and raise awareness for sexual minority identities in public spaces. Therefore, public LGBTQIA+ advocacy ideally works to boost social tolerance of LGBTQIA+ identities (Ayoub *et al* 2021:469). As stated, public LGBTQIA+ advocacy often relies on members of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to advocate actively for visibility and destigmatisation. These advocates are individuals who find themselves part of the wider LGBTQIA+ spectrum, and often take on multiple LGBTQIA+ identities. In this sense, these self-identified LGBTQIA+ advocates identities consist of an amalgamation of their sexual orientation and gender identity (Renn 2007:323).

LGBTQIA+ advocates have heightened, complex public personas: LGBTQIA+ advocates actively shift their identities "from a private sense of self as non-heterosexual" and integrate their specified LGBTQIA+ identities with their LGBTQIA+ advocacy in order to gain public recognition for themselves and for LGBTQIA+ identities as a whole (Renn 2007:311). These LGBTQIA+ advocates are often given "celebrity status" and are well-known in LGBTQIA+ spaces (Schmid & Payam 2023:2180). The effects of public LGBTQIA+ advocacy through public LGBTQIA+ advocates may "reach diverse societal groups in different ways" (Ayoub *et al* 2021:470). Visibility and heightened public attention to sexual and gender minorities does not directly mean overall tolerance, destigmatisation and support (Ayoub *et al* 2021:472). Public asexual advocates are examples of activism that is often inadequately received in non-asexual spaces. Public asexual advocates have complex identities which overlap with other

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identities in the LGBTQIA+ community. The complexity of these individuals' public personas are heightened when asexuality is the identity that they wish to prioritise.

As a minority sexual orientation, asexuality remains invisible to many non-asexuals and the self-acceptance of one's asexual identity may pose a threat to those who are unaware of asexuality as a sexual orientation. Those who are unaware of asexuality may perceive it to threaten traditional gender norms, and without adequate knowledge about asexuality, these individuals often face alienation from others as a result of the stigmatisation and the invisibility of non-sexuality in LGBTQIA+ spaces (Gupta 2017:991). Those who are not familiar with asexuality and view public personas of asexuality are confused by the complex-nature of these identities, and this leads to an overall stigmatisation, dehumanisation and de-legitimisation for asexuality.

3.2.1 *Yasmin Benoit*

Figure 39 presents a tweet from Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit). Benoit describes herself as a "British model, multi-award-winning asexual activist, writer, speaker, media consultant and researcher" (Benoit 2023). Benoit creates informative asexual content, and she is the creator of the hashtag #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike, which is popularly used by asexuals on Instagram and Twitter. Therefore, her asexual activist persona forms part of her larger, complexed identity and through her own labelling, Benoit is a self-identified public persona of asexuality.

Figure 39: Yasmin Benoit's tweet (@theyasminbenoit), 16 August 2020. Screenshot by the author.

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In her tweet, Benoit posts three images of herself. She is dressed in a pair of small shorts and a bra, which are indexical of lingerie, and she poses in ways that show off her body and her lingerie. Her post is guided through intertextuality, as it is accompanied with the text: "This is your reminder that asexual people are hot and are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Just encase you forgot." Benoit ends this tweet off with the hashtag #LGBTQIAofTwitter. Lingerie is often understood to be a signifier of female sexuality and wanting to feel 'sexy' and 'sensual'. The word "hot", added to her posing in lingerie, presents Benoit's belief that she is an attractive woman, one who is confident about her appearance.

As a consequence of compulsory sexuality, wearing lingerie is culturally coded as sex-positive, labelling someone to be a sexual person. This sentiment contradicts asexual myths that position asexual identified people as being sexless, prudish and unattractive (Przybylo 2019:8). Sloan (2015:549) states that asexuals who participate in Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission (BDSM) "struggle to navigate the implications of a lack of interest, aversion, or anxiety concerning sexual relationships within a society that expects and privileges sexual desire as a form of intimacy and self-expression." Connotatively, Benoit's post is a symbol of her asexuality: through the visualisation of her body as a representation of asexuality, aided by the accompanied text, Benoit's iconography dismisses the myth of asexuality that assumes asexuals to be desexualised individuals. This is a complex form of identification and positions asexuality as an inconsistent sexual orientation. This visualisation of asexuality may be confusing for those who are unaware of the spectrum of asexuality and are only aware of myths of asexuality. Barker *et al* (2018:1339) state that female bodies "are under constant – and increasingly magnified – surveillance", further arguing that "several forms of bodily discipline and 'aesthetic labour' are normatively demanded to shape bodies for sex and sexual desire, and attempts to challenge this are responded to with punitive regulation". Despite visualising her asexuality through intertextuality, Benoit's body is sexualised.
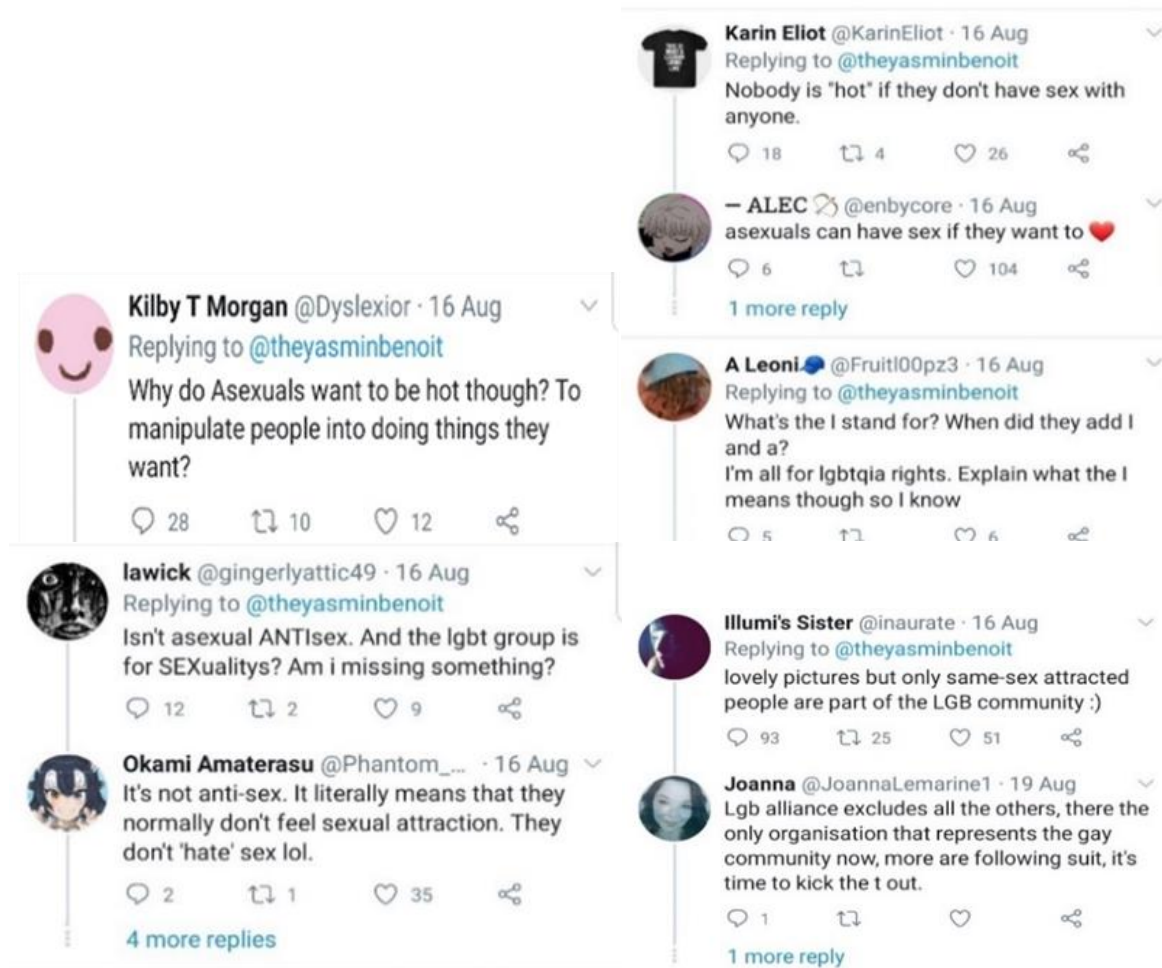
Figure 40: Some negative Twitter replies left after Yasmin Benoit's 16 August 2020 tweet (@theyasminbenoit), 16 August 2020. Screenshots by the author.

Figure 40 shows some of the negative replies she received under her original tweet. These replies replicate myths of asexuality. One user questions why an asexual individual would want to be "hot", further stating that asexual people would only want to be perceived as attractive so that they could manipulate other people into "doing things they want". Two more users leave negative comments, one making the assumption that asexuals are anti-sex and that the LGBTQIA+ community is for sexualities, while the second user gatekeeps the LGBTQIA+ community, making this comment: "Lovely pictures but only same-sex attracted people are part of the LGB community".[54] Another user states that "nobody is 'hot' if they don't have sex with anyone" and another user replies to them, saying that asexuals can have sex if they want to.

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[54] A user replies to this comment, expressing that they feel that the "LGB" alliance excludes all others, and radically exclaims that "it's time to kick the t out", as in, remove transgender from the LGBTQIA+ community.

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Figure 41: Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit), 25 August 2020. Screenshot by the author.

Figures 41 and 42 present some of these harmful responses that Benoit received on her original tweet, and she attaches them to an Instagram post that she posts to her Instagram page (@theyasminbenoit on Instagram). One user has accused her of being a "little harlet who is a rape baiter with a promising future", while another user dehumanises her entirely. Benoit's body, through the eyes of the commentors in Figure 43-44, becomes semiotically portrayed as a sexual person: her asexuality is dismissed. The users may not be aware of the spectrum of asexuality and may assume that asexuality is a desexualised group that rejects all forms of sexual expression. These individuals shame her for showing her body and maintaining that she is attractive, all the while also shaming her for identifying as an asexual, which in their mind, refers to someone who should not show their body. These comments harmfully and incorrectly link asexuality to innate predatory and manipulative behaviour.

Figure 42: Additional slides from Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit), 25 August 2020. Screenshots by the author.

These comments also pathologise, dehumanise and villainise asexuals. I argue that some of these responders are imposing the Jezebel stereotype onto Benoit, highly sexualising her and assuming that her asexual identity is actually hidden sexual promiscuity and deviance (Miles 2019:5). Ironically, it is these commentors who are expressing predatory and manipulative behaviour: simply because she is posting pictures of herself and indicating that she identifies as asexual, these users assume that she 'leading them on'. Her public persona is too complex for these users: through her visualisation, users may become confused, as her physical appearance contradicts their preconceived ideas about asexuality.

Figure 43 is a screenshot of one of the campaign images that Benoit posted onto Twitter and Instagram during #AceWeek2021.[55] Benoit states that she has collaborated with Playful Promises (@playfulpromises on Instagram) to create the "first ever asexual-themed lingerie campaign" and that "the purpose of the shoot was to provide more diverse representation and let the world know that #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike".

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[55] Ace week happens once a year and takes place during 24-31 October. During ace week, self-identified asexuals and asexual activists come together as a community to celebrate asexuality and create asexual visibility. Some people share accurate and helpful information about asexuality on social media sites, while others share their asexual art and writing.

Figure 43: Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit),
28 October 2021. Screenshot by the author.

Unsurprisingly, Benoit was met with an influx of messages that dehumanised her asexual identity, disallowing asexuality to be understood as a sexual orientation, and further pathologising asexuality and linked asexuality to sexual deviancy (Figures 44-46). Harmful stereotypes that were introduced in her first tweet are repeated in the comments left on her new post. One individual insinuates that asexuality is linked to paedophilia, a few commenters reinstate the idea that asexuality is not part of LGBTQIA+, some cannot conceptualise why an asexual person would want to appear attractive, while one commentor medicalises asexuality by linking the side-effects of antidepressant medications with asexuality. These comments continue to delegitimise asexuality, working together to paint asexuality to be a sexual deviancy and not a sexual orientation.
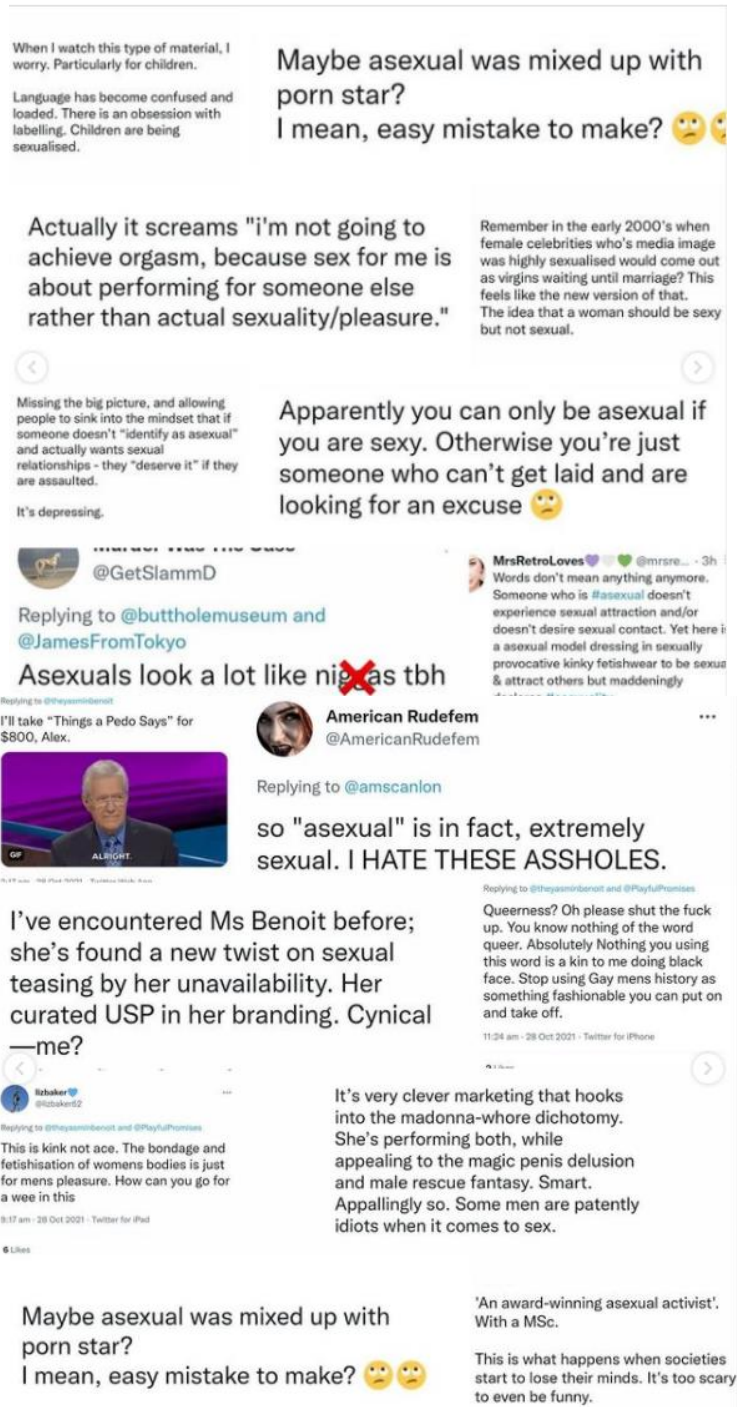
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Figure 44: Comments that are incorporated on slides found within Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit), 28 October 2021. Screenshot by the author.

More absolute rubbish. PVC clad soft-S&M is now asexual. Seriously, is this what you'd wear when ordering half a pound of stilton from the Sainsbury's counter? I think what this really means is that none of the sexual organs work because of trans chemical castration.

You're very beautiful but I think most of us asexual women prefer comfort over porn inspiration. For whose benefit is this finery? Show me big granny knickers in this "campaign" or I remain cynical. 😃

[?] AM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter for Android

This is what untreated madness looks like.

Yasmin Benoit, MSc (taking a lil break) ✓ [?] · Oct 27
"I wish that we could expand our understanding of queerness outside of who wants to have sex with who and how. That way, there would be less debate about asexual inclusion & it'd happen organically."

She is free. She is doing it. She looks hot.

I find it insanely inconsistent that an asexual person would enjoy that.

LGBT+ INTL DIRECTORY
@LGBT_INTL
Replying to @theyasminbenoit and @PlayfulPromises

Do you know what asexuality is? This is Not what asexual looks like! 🙁

10:24 AM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter Web App

@PlayfulPromises

Woman wearing erotic lingerie, how exactly is this different to other women wearing exactly the same kind of stuff designed to turn on men? How is it different to porn? What am I missing 🤷

[?] · Twitter for iPad

MauraSerena
@MauraSerena1
Replying to @theyasminbenoit and @PlayfulPromises

@theyasminbenoit Asexual!? So is asexual now synonymous with sadomasochistic fetish? 🤔

4:52 PM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Leya ⬛🟥⬛🟩⬛
@_Leyanelle_

"Let's not forget, the value of women is in their fuckability" says the not at all confused, & totally feminist & progressive asexual 🤦

Mrs. Murdersmith
@Murdersmith
Replying to @SophNar0747

Meanwhile, antidepressants can kill your libido.....and people are turning it into a whole identity. 👀

More absolute rubbish. PVC clad soft-S&M is now asexual. Seriously, is this what you'd wear when ordering half a pound of stilton from the Sainsbury's counter? I think what this really means is that none of the sexual organs work because of trans chemical castration.

@lizbaker62
Replying to @theyasminbenoit and @PlayfulPromises

This is kink not ace. The bondage and fetishisation of womens bodies is just for mens pleasure. How can you go for a wee in this

9:17 am · 28 Oct 2021 · Twitter for iPad

Replying to @theyasminbenoit and @PlayfulPromises

Looks pornographic to me.

12:44 PM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter Web App

1 Like

ŞPUTZEE 💀 DALCASSIAN
@SputzeeD
Replying to @SophNar0747

Is there a nude asexual version as well?

1:49 PM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Craig Williams
@CraigW6620
Replying to @theyasminbenoit

Narcissistic attention seeking money grabbing knob...

3:27 PM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

Replying to @iseult and @mary_scone

Hey Tristan, check this out!
I thought it was a mannequin in those clothes.
There seems to be some sort of asexual talking sex-bot:

@AllenardvieI5[?]
Replying to @theyasminbenoit and @PlayfulPromises

So an asexual person dresses up like a porn actress to celebrate the fact they are not interested in sex? Hmmmm....

11:31 AM · Oct 28, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Figure 45: More comments that are incorporated on slides found within Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit), 28 October 2021. Screenshot by the author.

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Figure 46: Additional comments that are incorporated on slides found within Yasmin Benoit's Instagram post (@theyasminbenoit), 28 October 2021. Screenshot by the author.

These replies dangerously dismiss asexuality as a valid identifying category: those who are unfamiliar with asexuality might come across these types of comments and wrongfully associate asexuality with harmful and misguided tropes, myths and stereotypes. Manuel Gámez-Guadix and Daniel Incera (2021) conducted a case study of the prevalence and frequency of different forms of online sexual victimisation and risks among sexual minorities. They found that "sexual minorities often make greater use of the internet", using online spaces to meet like-minded individuals and avoiding situations of rejection and homophobic bullying (Gámez-Guadix & Incera 2021:1). Asexuals who come across these comments may start a process of self-questioning, their asexual experiences and their decision to identify as asexual. This can lead to self-hatred and potential personal risk.

In another dehumanising comment, one commentator states that Benoit is using "gay men's history" as a fashion-statement, and something that Benoit is not part of. The idea of comparing

sexual minority group's struggles is what Ange-Marie Hancock (in Nash 2012:819) calls "Oppression Olympics", which refers to instances where "contested unidimensional constructions of oppression compete with each other". The comparison of oppressions can be found throughout the negative comments that are left on Benoit's posts. Asexual theorists and activists alike are constantly ensuring that sufficient, continuous credit is given to lesbian and gay communities that fought for sexual freedom. Asexuals acknowledge that, despite experiencing certain instances of acephobia and discrimination, their experiences are not the same as other members of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

Throughout most LGBTQIA+ communities it is commonly accepted that one can experience different levels of oppression: this is because cultural, historical and social systems are notorious for having hierarchies that privilege certain ways of being while oppressing and Othering all of those that do not conform to these ideals. However, one form of oppression cannot be dismissed and invalidated because it is not another form of oppression. It is unjust to dismiss Benoit's experience of discrimination in order to recognise another form of oppression as 'true' oppression. Chan (2018:1454) states that "the process of and strategies for breaking social boundaries often provoke new discrimination" that self-activism cannot avoid. Benoit is unable to be seen as only an asexual, only an activist or only a model, making her asexual activism inseparable from her larger identity (Renn 2007:319). Due to her complex public persona, users are unable to identify with her asexuality, and they dismiss asexuality.

Remarkably, these comments, although incredibly destructive, do not deter Benoit from establishing herself as an asexual activist. She makes it a point to continuously symbolise her asexuality through her digitalised public persona. Her online presence is important for asexuality as, through her visual manifestation, Benoit attracts attention to asexuality as a sexual orientation (Ayoub *et al* 2021:467). Katrin Tiidenberg and Ariri-Alina Allaste (2020:317) state that "celebrity activists" who publicly display their LGBTQIA+ identities have the power to positively impact social assumptions that surround marginalised identity groups. Further, Benoit's public persona of asexuality can reinforce collective identity-building for other asexuals, which allows them to validate their own asexual identities. Overall, Yasmin Benoit's asexual representation seems to challenge traditionally held beliefs that surround asexuality. Visually she does not rely on past myths of asexuality and utilises her own sexual agency to present a different side to asexuality. Benoit continues to use her imagery to perform her asexuality, and therefore, her representation aids in validating the lived-experience of those

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who are also on the asexual spectrum and also take part in sexual expression behaviours. This confident side to asexuality is one that is not commonly found within asexual representations, which is evident in the reactions of other users. This nuanced portrayal of asexuality is perplexing to the users interact with Benoit's posts. Her complex persona confuses these users, as Benoit does not centre her whole persona around asexuality.

For some users, Benoit's mere online presence leads them to disregard asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. These individuals refuse to accept Benoit's sexual agency, purely viewing her visual attractiveness as an indicator of an 'available' sexualised body. They seem to believe that by posing in lingerie or more revealing clothing, she is semiotically communicating she conforms to compulsory sexuality. These individuals rely on heterosexual norms to control their belief systems, and therefore, see items of clothing and specific poses as 'sexualised'. These individuals reduce asexuality to a stereotyped myth: a total rejection of all things perceived to be sexual in a Western heteronormative society. According to MacNeela and Murphy (2015:803) asexuality lacks social credibility and they state that "most of the time, people find a way to dismiss asexuality so that they can continue to claim that all human beings are fundamentally sexual creatures." Asexual theory replicates these "denial narratives": Przybylo (2019:123) states that asexuality is mythicised as a desexualised sexual orientation that bans asexuals from sexual agency. However, as an identity, asexuality encompasses a variety of asexual experiences, meaning that asexual identities are "unfixed, evolving and highly personal" and therefore asexuality cannot be generalised (Carroll 2019:16).

Through the negative feedback, Benoit's visual representation provides digital evidence of acephobia, and this is ironic as some users argue that asexuals do not experience discrimination and oppression. Thus, Benoit's representation of asexuality is complex: it becomes evident that Benoit's complex public persona of asexuality cannot be conceptualised by other non-asexual social media users. Her public persona contradicts their preconceived notions of asexuality. Her public persona does not centre around asexuality, and as a marginalised sexual orientation, Benoit's asexuality allows for dehumanisation, pathologisation and the overall dismissal of asexuality.

3.2.2 *Michelle Lin and @LGBT*

@LGBT is an Instagram account that is curated by @rainbowmediaco and is "made by queer people for queer people" with the goal of creating a space where LGBTQIA+ people can discuss and celebrate who they are. Their community guidelines state that they have a zero-tolerance policy regarding "homophobia, transphobia, biphobia and aphobia"[56] and they will decide whether to remove inappropriate comments or permanently ban people who are disrespectful towards sexualities (Community guidelines [Sa]). Therefore, @LGBT is an online space that advocates for LGBTQIA+ communities. @LGBT posted an image (Figure 47), which denotatively presents a young female holding up a flag. The woman appears to be smiling, and the flag that she is holding symbolises the asexual flag.

Figure 47: An Instagram post by LGBT (@LGBT), 22 January 2020. Screenshot by the author.

Connotatively, the asexual flag, with the asexual woman, accompanied with the caption symbolises the acceptance of asexuality within an inclusive LGBTQIA+ space (the @LGBT Instagram page). This is monumental for asexuality as @LGBT is a familiar page to some members of the LGBTQIA+ community: this page is inclusive and posts a wide variety of

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[56] Aphobia is discrimination against asexual people. This discrimination is also known as Acephobia.

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other identity representations, while also being a site for helpful resources and information for those who form part of the LGBTQIA+ acronym. Lissitsa and Kushnirovich (2021:2509) state that through greater intergroup contact, a positive association between exposure to LGBTQIA+ related content can in turn, positively impact attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people. This post makes use of intertextuality, as there is an accompanied caption. The caption states that the individual pictured is Michelle Lin. The caption uses hashtags like #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike and #asexualpride. Lin's tagged Instagram page is public, and she identifies herself as a Chinese American, an asexual activist and a dancer. Through her plethora of identifications, Lin is presented as a dynamic person. Her page includes images of her performing traditional Chinese dances, as well as has images of her at LGBTQIA+ events where she is holding asexual and other LGBTQIA+ flags. She does not centre her identification around her asexual identity. Therefore, through her multiple identities, as well as her self-identification as an asexual activist, Lin is classified as a public persona of asexuality.

Lin's public persona of asexuality is accepted by some users who form part of the asexual spectrum (Figure 48). Other users praise @LGBT for including an asexual person on their profile, expressing appreciation for the visibility of asexuality as a sexual identifier and the inclusive nature of including asexuality as an established LGBTQIA+ orientation. Through these affirming comments, Linn's activism is shown to raise awareness and support for asexuality (Ayoub *et al* 2021:467). Chan (2022:2) states that asexuals, like other LGBTQIA+ members, use social media to explore their identities and to express themselves. Interaction and communication with other similarly identified users is valuable as social media "facilitates identity-related support from similar others, and users can gain validation, social acceptance and a sense of mattering" (Chan 2022:3). According to Lissitsa and Kushnirovich (2021:2522-2523) "when outgroup members are viewed as fellow humans deserving of moral consideration" attitudes towards outgroup members such as asexuals, improves as a whole. Online public personas like Lin humanise asexual identities "making them appear accessible, approachable, and likeable" (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2513). Chan (2022:8) maintains that marginalised groups such as asexuals may feel less accepted and belonging to the wider LGBTQIA+ spectrum and may be fearful of further stigmatisation and rejection in LGBTQIA+ spaces. This post validates the asexual experience by associating asexuality with the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (Scherrer 2008:624). Discovering a like-minded community has a profound effect on minority identified individuals as it facilitates in self-clarification and self-acceptance through a sense of a shared communal trait (Carrigan 2011:475).

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Virtual communities become a space where stigmatised, marginalised identity groups and individuals like asexuals can come together to find support (Scherrer 2008:624). Teut (2019:97) argues that LGBTQIA+ sexual minority groups like asexuals are harrassed and excluded from larger LGBTQIA+ communities, and by coming across asexual inclusive LGBTQIA+ virtual communities, asexuals are introduced to more online support networks. Asexuality as a marginalised, spectrum orientated sexual orientation allows asexuals to explore their identity in the LGBTQIA+ community and therefore asexual representations like Lin's are validating for asexual who are part of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (Mollet & Lackman 2015:627). Jacobs and Meeusen (2021:2149) state that "visual cues have been shown to be effective in shaping public opinion due to their straightforward interpretations", and therefore, the visual association of asexuality in a LGBTQIA+ space allows for allyship amongst asexuals and other marginalised orientations and identities. Lin's asexual public persona thus has the potential to empower other asexual individuals and further, her online asexuality may help improve visibility of asexuality, leading to an increased acceptance by the wider LGBTQIA+ population (Yang 2019:667).

There are a few hateful comments left by Instagram users (Figure 48) who continue to exclude asexuality from the LGBTQIA+ community, rather dismissively categorising it as a disorder. One user states that "aspec is autism not lgbt."[57] This statement pathologises asexual people, leaving asexuality to be seen as a biological disorder and not a sexual orientation (Bogaert 2006:247; Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:648). Another user writes "imagine thinking asexuals are lgbt", which reflects an ongoing discussion amongst researchers, asexual people and the LGBTQIA+ community, that questions whether asexuality should be included into the LGBTQIA+ acronym (Mollet & Lackman 2015). Asexuality is a spectrum, and, as I have already argued, those who have an asexual identity can experience different types of attraction towards different gender identities. This means that asexuals can identify as an LGBTQIA+ individual (Scherrer 2008:634-637). As Lin and the asexual flag are posted on a LGBTQIA+ friendly page, it would not be incorrect to assume that a portion of the asexual community identifies under the LGBTQIA+ acronym, with another portion of the LGBTQIA+ happily accepting asexuality as one of their own.

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[57] Aspec refers to anyone that identifies under the asexual, aromantic and agender spectrum.

Another user replies to the comment that excludes asexuality from the LGBTQIA+ spectrum by validating that asexuals are LGBTQIA+; this leads to a conversation between the two users, with the original commenter wanting to know "where were the aces at stonewall."[58] This question attempts to invalidate asexuality as part of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, making it seem as if asexuals were not around during one of the most prolific LGBTQIA+ movements. It is important to note that the LGBTQIA+ movement is found all around the world, with many activists and LGBTQIA+ actively fighting for their basic human rights. Nonetheless, a third user replies that Isaac Newton was an asexual and he was alive before Stonewall.
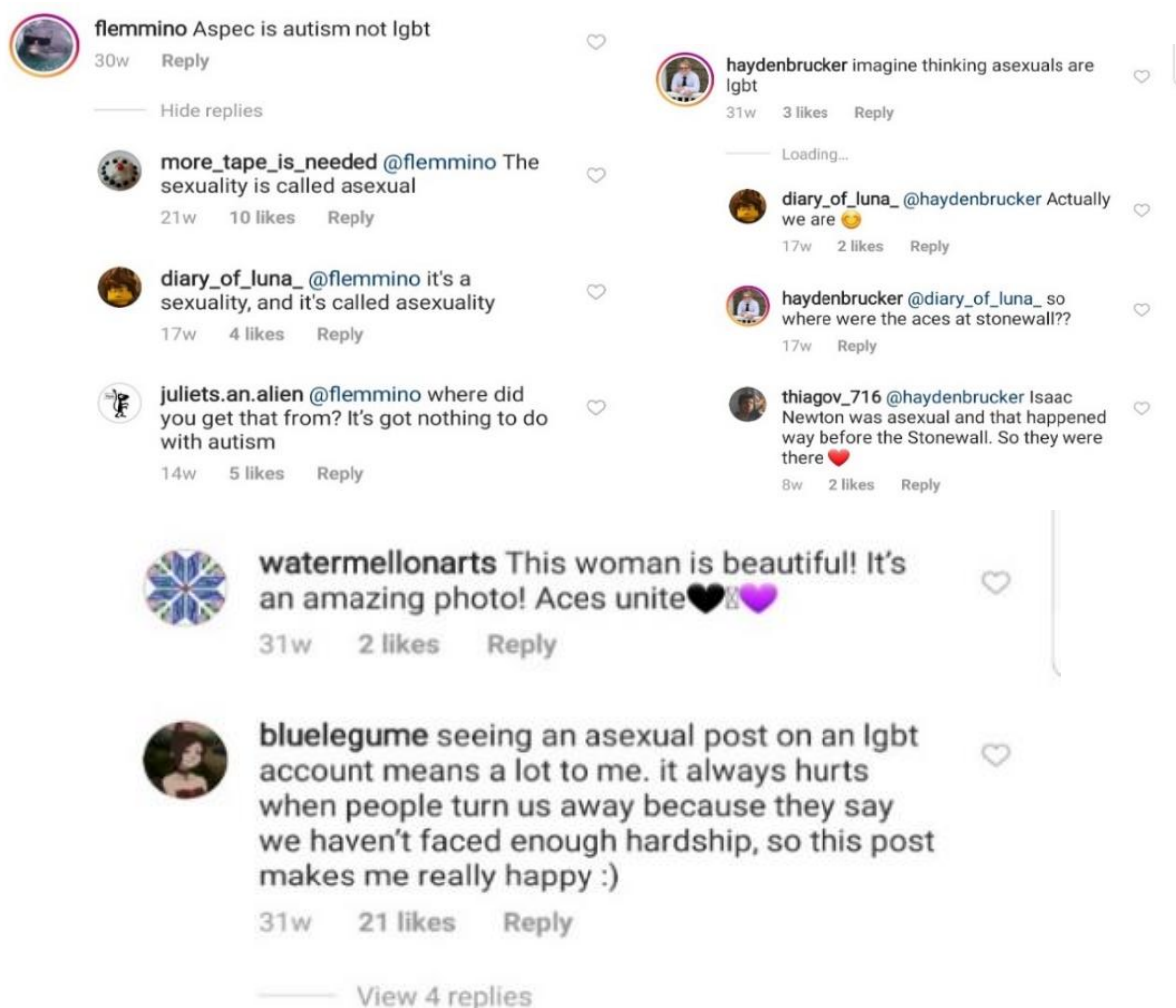

Figure 48: Replies left on LGBT's Instagram post (@LGBT), 22 January 2020. Screenshot by the author.

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[58] Stonewall refers to the 1969 uprisings in Manhattan, United States of America, which centred around "America's gay-rights movement" (Walsh 2019).

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Asexuality and the lack of sexual attraction has existed for decades, but the term "asexual" has only been used and popularised during the late twentieth century (DeLuzio Chasin 2011:714). Through a queer theoretical framework, it is clear to see that where there is queerness, there is asexuality, and so, it is rather limiting to suggest that there were no asexuals attending the Stonewall riots. Importantly, during the 1960s and during the second wave of feminism, some radical feminists actively rejected compulsory heterosexuality, adopting lesbian and asexual identities as a form of protesting (Przybylo 2019). Although these forms of identification do not reflect the traditionally held understandings of lesbianism and asexuality, it is important to note that, if labels are what matters, there were in fact asexuals at Stonewall.

Through a critique of the feedback Lin's public persona of asexuality receives, it is apparent that her asexuality resonates with other asexuals. Her asexuality is easily recognisable for them, and this visual awareness allows them to mobilise support and promote their diverse asexual identities within a LGBTQIA+ space (Jacobs & Meeusen 2021:2149). For these individuals, asexuality is the key identifier of her public persona, and they substitute her asexual representation for real-life asexual activism (Jacobs & Meeusen 2021:2145). Despite this, Lin's public asexual persona endures denial narratives that work towards dismissing asexuality as a sexual orientation, and asexuality as a sexual orientation that falls under the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. The negative, dehumanising and pathologising comments remain on the @LGBT post, and I wonder whether those who monitor the account have seen these comments and have decided that they are not acephobic and do not go against their zero-tolerance policy, or whether they only monitor the comments on their most recent posts. As a self-identified safe space for people in the LGBTQIA+ community, these comments are harmful and contribute to the continued stigmatisation of asexuality.

It becomes clear that, due to prejudiced myths of asexuality, and through Lin's public persona of asexuality, this representation of asexuality is unable to be recognised amongst non-asexuals. Her public persona is too complex: non-asexuals are unable to conceptualise asexuality as a sexual orientation, as it is portrayed in a LGBTQIA+ space. Those who are unaware of the dynamic nature of asexuality cannot conceptualise it to be a sexual orientation that forms part of the LGBTQIA+ acronym. Lin's public asexual persona is not expanded on in this specific post: she is merely labelled an asexual. A lack of focus on an individual's asexual identity disallows for a strong emotional investment to be experienced by those unfamiliar with the asexual spectrum (Chan 2022:2; Jacobs &Meeusen 2021:2161). The non-

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asexuals users that are part of the LGBTQIA+ are thus unable to identify with Lin's portrayed asexuality, and therefore, these users are unable to connect with her on a human level (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2524).

3.2.3 *Venus Envy*

Drag queens, also referred to as drag performers, have traditionally been described as gay men who use makeup, clothing and exaggerated behaviour to imitate women through a caricature-like performance (Schmid & Payam 2023:2180). Anna Theresa Schmid and Shahin Payam (2023:2181) argue that drag queens create these 'characters' or personas as an expression of creativity, and drag performances are commonly enjoyed by LGBTQIA+ populations. Figure 45 presents a person who is wearing a visible amount of makeup. This is a drag performer, Venus Envy. Venus Envy is a biological woman who performs as a drag entertainer. She also identifies as a queer asexual: during a podcast (Costello & Kaszyca 2021), Envy reveals that she does not experience sexual attraction, but she has experienced moments of romantic attraction in the past. Figure 49 presents intertextuality through the accompanied text that explains that she does not like to discuss her asexuality on Twitter because "it's often met with invalidation and exclusion". In this post, Envy makes herself visible as an asexual by using the hashtags #AceVisibilityDay and #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike. Therefore, Venus Envy offers her visual likeness as an asexual representation. As mentioned, Envy has multiple identities that form part of her larger identity, and asexuality is one that she often highlights throughout her social media accounts. Therefore, Envy can be understood to be a public persona of asexuality.

Figure 49: Venus Envy's tweet (@VenusEnvyDrag), 8 May 2020. Screenshot by author.

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Butler (2004:42) argues that gender "is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized". The "heterosexual matrix" allows for the gender binarisation of 'female' and 'male', 'femininity' and 'masculinity', and 'man' and 'woman'. The stereotypes found within the "heterosexual matrix" are forcibly imposed onto bodies, impacting gender identity markers. Stereotypically, feminine expressions of sexuality are embodied through acts of passivity and inferiority, while masculine expressions of sexuality are embodied through acts of ridged aggressiveness and the activeness of a sex drive. Asexuality as a spectrum sexual orientation offers alternative ways of navigating traditional gender norms through the creation of a space where distinct gender identities can coexist amongst gender binaries, offering nuances ways of interpreting masculinity and femininity. Joshua Gamson and Dawne Moon (2004:52) state that through the existence of sexual and gender categories, humans are always influenced by social, cultural and institutional power ideologies and scripts. This influences the ways that we create, navigate and express our identities.

Butler (2011:174) argues that drag "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of the gender identity." Further, she notes that "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities." Douglas Knutson, Julie Koch, Jenilee Sneed, Anthony Lee and Mar Chung (2020:332) conducted a case study that investigated the association between female impersonation and gender norms. They interviewed 12 gay male drag queens and found that all their participants reported developing a drag persona that was completely in opposition to their 'out of drag' personas. These drag personas are described as a mimicry of femininity, and they "manipulate their feminine behaviour for comedic effect or to fulfil their performance goals." (Knutson *et al* 2020:333).

Schmid and Payam (2023) conducted a qualitative study that explored the lives of 10 German gay drag performers. They found that their participants portrayed their drag persona as a character that is separated from their male personality (Schmid & Payam 2023:2186). These drag performers characterised their female drag persona as an artificial persona, and they

classified their male 'out of drag' persona as their natural selves. Venus Envy states that when she first started performing, she would intentionally dress up oppositional to how she would dress in her everyday life. She states that she wanted her drag to be an opposite of herself, but she currently has decided to have her drag persona physically reflect her "true" self (Costello & Kaszyca 2021). She also mentions that she does not like to show her face out of drag. When she speaks about her asexuality, she does not distance it from her drag persona, but incorporates asexuality into her drag persona. Envy's public persona is complex: unlike male drag performers who impersonate femininity, Envy does not distinguish between her public drag persona and her private 'out of drag' persona and therefore, both of her personas are almost identical.

Envy states that her drag persona is an expression of her ideas surrounding femininity, and at times, admits to performing traditional stereotypes of femininity. For Butler, these "parodic identities" found within drag performances either degrade women or are seen as an appropriation "of sex-role stereotyping" found within heterosexual societies (Butler 2001:175). Butler (2011:175) states that drag creates a unified picture of "woman", and Knutson *et al* (2020:326) maintain that "drag performance risks marginalizing women". Therefore, through her parodic performance of femininity, Envy can be interpreted as both a degradation of women, an appropriation and promotion of "sex-role stereotyping" and a stylisation of female identities. As she does not distinguish her drag persona from her private self, Envy's overall complex public persona is one that parodies femininity in a way that is part of "hegemonic, misogynist culture" (Butler 2011:176). Butler states that this parody of femininity recontextualises it as a form of desexualised femininity (Butler 2011:176). Through this, Envy's asexuality becomes invisible as her identity as a drag queen is heightened: although asexuality formss part of her larger public persona, Envy's larger identity does not centre around her asexual identity. Nonetheless, Venus Envy's public persona is desexualised, and this complicates the way that she is perceived by other online individuals.

Figure 50 is a screenshot of a tweet Venus Envy made on 2 June 2022 where she uses comedy to present her belief that asexuality is invisible within the LGBTQIA+ community. Figure 51-42 presents a few of the replies that are left under Venus Envy's tweet. As previously stated, asexuality is a minority orientation that is often misunderstood as a non-sexual orientation, asexuality is often referred to as the "invisible orientation" and is often left out of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (Mollett & Lackman 2018:625; Teut 2019:95; Carroll 2019:3). This

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tweet coincides with asexual theory, and her tweet can be seen as her playfully advocating for visibility for asexuality within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Figure 50: A tweet made by Venus Envy (@VenusEnvyDrag), 2 June 2022. Screenshot by the author.

One user (Figure 51) replies, calling Envy a "LGBTQ menace". This user infers that the unnatural practice of asexuality will lead to the end of humanity. This user also believes asexuality to be a denial of one's true "internal chemistry". Envy responds to this user, and she advocates for asexuality as a valid sexual orientation. Figure 52 is a screenshot of another tweet left in reply to Envy's initial tweet. This user denies asexuality to be a sexual orientation. Both users seem to have been introduced to asexuality in the past, however, their comments show that they do not support asexuality. Those who dismiss asexuality regard it as lacking social credibility. MacNeela and Murphy (2015:803) argue that "most of the time, people find a way to dismiss asexuality so that they can continue to claim that all human beings are fundamentally sexual creatures."

Figure 51: One user's reply to Venus Envy's 2 June 2022 tweet (@VenusEnvyDrag). Screenshot by the author.
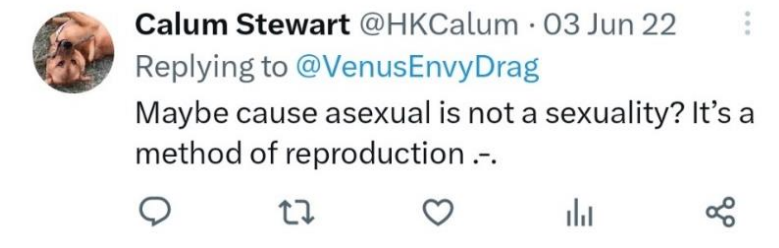
Figure 52: A response to Venus Envy's 2 June 2022 tweet (@VenusEnvyDrag). Screenshot by the author.

Figure 53 is a screenshot of a reel that Envy posted to her Instagram account. This reel is created by Envy, and she is seen participating in a popular trend that makes use of Jeff Goldblum's voice. In this trend, Goldblum is heard saying "people always ask me how to pronounce my name, Goldbloom or Goldblum. I always tell them the same thing, how dare you speak to me." Users utilise this snippet to show other users how to pronounce their name, or to answer a question that they are commonly asked. Envy uses this trend to communicate that she prefers to be called a drag queen, drag artist or a drag entertainer.

Figure 49: A screenshot of
Venus Envy's Instagram reel
(@venusenvydrag), 1 July 2023.
Screenshot by the author.

This reel has multiple negative comments under it (Figure 54). In Figure 54, one individual uses their Christianity to denounce Envy's drag persona. They believe that God would judge those that are drag performers and refers to Envy as an "abomination". Another user implies that Envy is a groomer.

Figure 54: Comments left on Venus Envy's 1 July 2023
Instagram reel (@venusenvydrag), 1 July 2023. Screenshot
by the author.

This is replicated in Figure 55, as one user believes that because Envy is a drag queen, she must be a man and she must be a paedophile. Another user states that Envy is mentally ill. Although asexuality is not mentioned in this reel, these comments replicate the dehumanising and pathologising characterisation of asexuality that is found within acephobic narratives, whereby asexuality is described to be a sexual dysfunction, a paraphilia or a symptom of a mental disorder (Van Houdenhove *et al* 2017:648).

Figure 55: More comments left on Venus Envy's 1 July 2023 Instagram reel (@venusenvydrag), 1 July 2023. Screenshot by author.

Venus Envy's public persona also elicits positive feedback from other asexuals. As evident in Figure 56, many users state that they are also part of the asexual community and praise her for her asexual representation. One asexual user writes that that they are appreciative of her post, and that she has inspired the user. Other asexuals praise her for visualising asexuality, and they tell her that she is valid. This 'indirect' contact with an asexual is shown to facilitate feelings of familiarity within their own asexual identities, which leads to self-validation and self-destigmatisation (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich 2021:2523). As McInroy and Craig (2017:35,38) argue, LGBTQIA+ individuals often lack real-life role models and representations, and by coming across a positive representation, they are able to validate their feelings and understand their own identity. Her online asexual representation is evident to invite asexual individuals to validate themselves and their feelings (Cowan & LeBlanc 2018:39; Lagerkvist 2014:206). These supportive comments affirm that, for those who form part of the asexual spectrum, Envy's public persona of asexuality affirms their own asexual identities (Ayoub *et al* 2021:467). Through her public persona of asexuality, Envy has created an asexual-friendly space where asexuals can find a community that supports their identity and beliefs (Scherrer 2008:624).

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Figure 56: Twitter replies on Venus Envy's tweet
(@VenusEnvyDrag), 8 May 2020. Screenshot by author.

It is evident that Venus Envy has a complex identity that leads to paradoxes: those who are familiar with asexuality resonate with her, and asexuals find Envy to affirm their own asexual identities (Brotto *et al* 2010:610; Carroll 2019:12). Her inclusion of her asexuality into her larger public persona is shown to be easily accepted by those within the asexual spectrum. Thus, Envy is conceptualised as a drag queen and all segments of her complex public persona are understood by the asexual community. However, those who are not part of the asexual spectrum do not positively associate with Envy's public asexual persona. It is evident that Venus Envy's public persona does not centre solely on one key identity. Envy embodies a unique intersection of identities that are perplexing to non-asexual individuals. These individuals may not desexualise Envy's feminised drag and may believe it to be a hyper-sexual performance.

This contradicts the myths of asexuality that position it as desexualised resistance to all forms of sexual expression, and evidently, individuals struggle to pin-point Envy's overall drag sexual expression. As stated by MacNeela and Murphy (2015:799) "socially, asexuality attracted denial and resistance due to incompatibility with heteronormative societal expectations". Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019:518) maintain that asexuality is often perceived to be an invisible orientation because asexuals have no distinct look. This is not to say that the "typical" asexual would "pass" as straight, but more often than not those who are LGBTQIA+

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are unconsciously "marked" as Other (Theo 2019:480). Scherrer (2008:628-629) states that many asexual individuals have their own interpretations of sexual acts and non-sexual acts and therefore, without separating her drag persona from her asexuality, non-asexuals view her as a sexual person who employs asexuality as a character trait. Schmid & Payam (2023:2181-2188) found that some of their informants navigated their two separate personas through complex interaction: they ensured that both personas could be easily distinguished as different from each other. This allowed them to hide parts of themselves from each of their personas. These drag queens ensured that there was a "strict division between the fictional character, and their personal sexuality" (Schmid & Payam 2023:2188).

Thus, Venus Envy's complex identity may be more easily interpreted by non-asexuals if she separated her asexuality from her public drag persona (Schmid & Payam 2023:2185). Venus Envy's asexuality is found within both her private and public personas, however, her intermingling of the two disallow her to be understood by those that are not familiar with asexuality. Therefore, Envy's public persona of asexuality is too complex, and allows for the pathologisation, villainisation and dehumanisation of asexuality as a sexual minority group.

3.3   Self-representations of asexuality

In this section, I attentively analyse self-representations of asexuality found on the Instagram page @thisiswhatasexuallookslike.[59] In direct Instagram messages, the account owner informed me that their goals for the Instagram page are to "provide a safe space for asexuals to see each other and for others to see how wonderfully diverse and broad the asexual community is". They state that their account provides a place of visibility for the asexual community, where people within the community can come together to build each other up, "spread positivity and get a break from being asexual in other spaces which aren't always as pleasant". Those who are interested in featuring on the page must complete a Google Form,[60] which clearly states that a person must be 18 years old and older to do so. The form asks for an email address, a name, preferred pronouns, how each applicant wishes to be tagged (for safety/privacy reasons),

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[59] According to the "Yasmin" Instagram story highlight on the @Thisiswhatasexuallookslike page, the first instance of the #thisiswhatasexuallookslike hashtag is credited to @kharotus on Instagram. Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit) is credited for popularising the hashtag, and the account owner states that they initially created the account to "amplify the voices of asexuals" who used the hashtag.
[60] The Google Form link can be found in the bio of the Instagram page: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1HMbRQ2ArM4v3g2x_cuVziv__B1TB_h-OszbAos-tgLA/viewform?edit_requested=true .

their Instagram username and the submission date. Applicants also have the option of adding any descriptions of themselves that they wish to be included in their potential Instagram posts. Due to the active nature of the account, I concluded my data set on 29 March 2022, with 341 posts to analyse.

This initial investigation resulted in the establishment of a set of visual and textual patterns, and through these patterns, I could identify three recurrent tropes constituting self-representations of asexuality. The self-representations of asexuality are examined through tropes that are concerned with asexual masculinity, non-binary asexuality, and the unity between LGBTQIA+ and asexuality. Through the process of scrutinising these self-representations of asexuality, specific heterosexual stereotypes and myths of asexuality are critiqued. It should be noted that this analysis uses in-depth interpretation and engagement practised through a lens of my own "cultural membership and social positionings" (Braun & Clarke 2006). Due to the reflective nature of this analysis, potential patterns of asexual self-representations that lead to productions of nuanced asexual tropes are subjective toward my own biases and preconceived notions, and therefore, it is important to note that these representations may can be engaged with in a variety of ways, depending on the reader's own set of ideologies.

3.3.1   *Asexual masculinity: charming striplings courting aesthetic attraction*

Through a semiotic analysis of the images presented on @thisiswhatasexuallookslike, an alternative and uncommon form of youthful masculinity, the stripling charmer, has come to light (Figures 57-60). These young men actively construct their self-representations of asexuality to be charming and court aesthetic attraction from other users. They are young, youthful, asexual men who distance themselves from stereotypical, body-focused self-representations, and through their soft features and friendly poses, these men present themselves as endearing. The men found within this trope represent a 'pretty' side to masculinity, an asexual masculinity.

Through a rejection of traditional gender roles, the men in this trope expand upon traditional gender categories by determining their own masculine identities. Asexual men are faced with the same heterosexist norms that dominate the narratives of all social identities. These naturalised gender stereotypes, in turn, create an opportunity for these young asexual men to

challenge these behaviours, and through this, the men in this trope present gender-atypical traits.

These men represent a more tender form of masculinity, one that redefines masculine aesthetic performance through pragmatic adjustments and negotiation with their asexual identities. It should be noted that while these individuals are men, they exhibit a boyish, alluring charm with no sexual undertones attached to them. These representations are of real-life men who are past the age of sexual development and adolescence; they are over the age of eighteen and are aware of traditional gender norms that surround them. They have actively grown into their asexuality. They personify what Gross (1991:20) says: that the most effective and powerful form of resistance is to speak for oneself.

Figure 57: Douglas, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 16 January 2019. Screenshot by the author.

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Figure 58: Alex, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 21 January 2019. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 59: Alessio, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instaram), 6 December 2019. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 60: Kyle, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 25 June 2019. Screenshot by the author.

Each man is wearing a long-sleeved shirt, and their skin is only exposed on their face and hands (Douglas, Alex and Kyle). Alessio (Figure 59) and Kyle (Figure 60) are wearing patterned shirts, and Kyle wears a scarf. This scarf has symbolic colours that signify the aromantic flag.[61] The men's facial expressions are not exaggerated: Douglas (Figure 57) is comfortably smiling, while Alessio and Kyle have soft smiles. Alex (Figure 58) is looking up and has a slight smile. He also has yellow emoticon hearts edited above his head. Douglas's hands are visible, and he is holding a cell phone. Alex is posed with his head resting in the palm of his hand, and Kyle is making a gesture that signifies 'okay' or good. In every image, each man presents his face and portions of his upper body, which takes up most of each picture's composition. Only slivers of their backgrounds can be seen. All the men are posed in familial spaces, with Douglas in a type of living room and Alessio in a room indexical to a kitchen or a restaurant, as there are shelves with drinking glasses behind him. Kyle and Alex's faces take up most of their pictures, only allowing the walls to be visible.

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[61] The aromantic flag, which denotes the spectrum of little or no romantic attraction, is made up of five colours. These colours are dark green, light green, white, grey, and black.

The asexual men included in this trope challenge the oversimplified and limiting binary poles found within the existing categories of masculinity. Aesthetically speaking, these men are neither effeminate, hyper-masculine, nor androgynous. As a gender expression, the asexual masculinity that is found in this trope removes a sense of sexual objectification, 'sexual assumption', and an imposed compulsory heterosexuality from the individual. The men do not portray typical depictions of hypersexual or desexualised individuals, and this is made apparent through the visual imagery of their selfies. In their appearance, these men do not conform to the norms of sexual dominance but rather work towards denaturalising essentialist perceptions of asexuality (Carroll 2019:13). This performance of asexual masculinity is not accomplished through popular methods of attracting someone romantically or sexually, but rather through the representations of the charming striplings who court those who come across their visual depictions. As a collective identity group, the men in this trope embody the rejection of the 'heterosexist matrix', exposing a subgroup of asexuality that is actively seeking out freedom from the gender matrix.

Following Butler (2004:7), these men have chosen to represent themselves in particular ways by "navigating among norms that are laid out in advance and prior to one's choice and are being articulated in concert by other minority agencies". Asexuality, therefore, works to redefine traditional behaviours that are easily recognisable as sexual by providing different ways to express oneself. As a result of this, those who have adopted an asexual identity that works to redefine what masculinity means go through self-discovery processes whereby a personal decision is made regarding boundaries that they will set between themselves and others (Dawson *et al* 2019:15). This process allows individuals to reject portraying themselves as objects of desire, and it is only through thinking asexually that we can begin to unpack the physical manifestations of masculinity that the men in this trope present. The stripling charmers engage in negotiations surrounding their masculinity to feel and receive emotional intimacy (Dawson *et al* 2016:649). Courting, as evident in this trope, is not acted on by a drive from a sexual attraction, but rather through an unpacking of the norms surrounding sexual and romantic desires. Employing semiotic decoding, these men send messages about their unique asexual identities through a variety of visual codes, which, in turn, allows for an embodied symbolism of asexual masculinity. Within this trope, it is emphasised that this form of masculine asexuality strives to challenge heterosexist norms through the promotion and acceptance of platonic, affectional, and romantic expressions.

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After a closer inspection of the men's submissions on the @thisiswhatasexuallookslike, viewers are charmed and courted by their visual representations. Other users exhibit effects of affectional and aesthetic attraction by positively interacting with the images. They leave non-sexual, affectional, platonic, and, in some sense, romantic-toned comments to connect with each man. Romantic and respectful gestures include asking for a hug (Figure 58), using terms such as "aesthetic attraction" (Figure 59), comments such as "you're adorable" (Figure 60) and "good-looking" (Figure 57), and expressing an interest in a non-sexual type of relationship (Figure 57). Carrigan (2011:473) states that asexuality provides an opportunity to navigate the connections between humans without exclusively using sexual fulfilment as an end goal. By thinking asexually, many traditional 'sexual' behaviours become redefined as non-sexual (Scherrer 2008:629). Therefore, the comments users leave on these posts work to express a different type of desire, one separated from assumed sexuality. Their attempts at connection and establishing a closeness with these asexual men present a clear rethinking of intimacy and human connectedness.

Through the exploration of the charming striplings that court by means of aesthetic attraction, I have presented one type of self-represented asexual persona that falls onto the more positive spectrum of existing asexual identity examples. For instance, this trope avoids the stereotyping of asexuality that exists in other asexual representations: on the one hand, it circumvents the representation of the redundant, sexless asexual, and on the other hand, it also evades the representation of a utopic 'golden star' form of asexuality. By critically analysing this trope, asexuality is shown to provide an alternative to the oversimplified, limiting, and reiterated effeminate and hyper-sexual poles that typify stereotypes of masculinity. The men in this trope offer an embodied acceptance of what it means to be a young, asexual man. As evident, this unique form of asexuality frees itself from the constricting notions of traditional gender and sexual expressions and is accepted by other asexual identities that form part of the ever-growing asexual community.

Through an accurate, relatable, and reiterated representation of an alternative to heteronormative masculinity, the men in this trope create a space that challenges normative representations of beauty, gender, and sexuality; these visual representations can serve as a site for a better understanding of asexuality (Vivienne 2017:126; McInroy & Craig 2017:34,35). Consequently, by coming across the men in this trope, asexuals as a marginalised group may experience greater social acceptance, as non-asexuals may use the visual representations of

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these men to relate to and understand not only asexuality as a unique sexual orientation, but the varied ways that one can explore intimacy practices. In turn, the charming striplings contribute to visibility of the diversified asexual spectrum that extends through all forms of media. Thus, these representations work towards destigmatising and legitimising asexuality.

3.3.2 *The faces of non-binary asexuals*

An unconventional approach to stereotyped ideas about representations of the asexual identity has been contended amongst those who adopt a non-binary gender identity.[62] A common theme in the self-representation of asexual individuals who ascribe to a non-binary gender identity is the headshot. These individuals actively negotiate their non-binary identities by limiting their self-representations to their faces. The asexuals in this trope have androgynous facial features and hairstyles, which aid in sustaining their non-binary gender expressions. These individuals wear plain clothing, and only the upper shoulders are seen to centre their non-binary identities to their faces.

A dominant trope has been established and constructed around these representations: these young, non-binary, asexual individuals reject traditionally held representations of gender performance and command identity recognition through their digitised gender and sexual expressions (Figures 61-63). The non-binary asexuals that form part of this trope express their agency through visualisations of themselves, and these individuals prioritise their faces as a primary source for their nuanced asexual identity. This process of visually negotiating a bodiless, face-orientated, embodied gender expression is a hallmark of asexuality. As a form of identification, this type of identification practice is not an essentialist one but a strategic and positional way of constructing one's identity (Hall 1996:2). These non-binary asexuals construct their embodied identities through a deliberate rejection of societal norms, making use of their free agency to create boundaries surrounding the aesthetic representations of their faces. Through authentication, these individuals claim their own sets of gender expressions that become important visual symbols.

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[62] The recognition of these non-binary asexuals is made clear through the vocalisation of preferred pronouns that are submitted alongside their chosen images. These pronouns consist of they/them pronouns in conjunction with binary gendered pronouns and neopronouns.

Figure 61: Kody uses they/them pronouns (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 1 August 2019. Screenshot by the author.
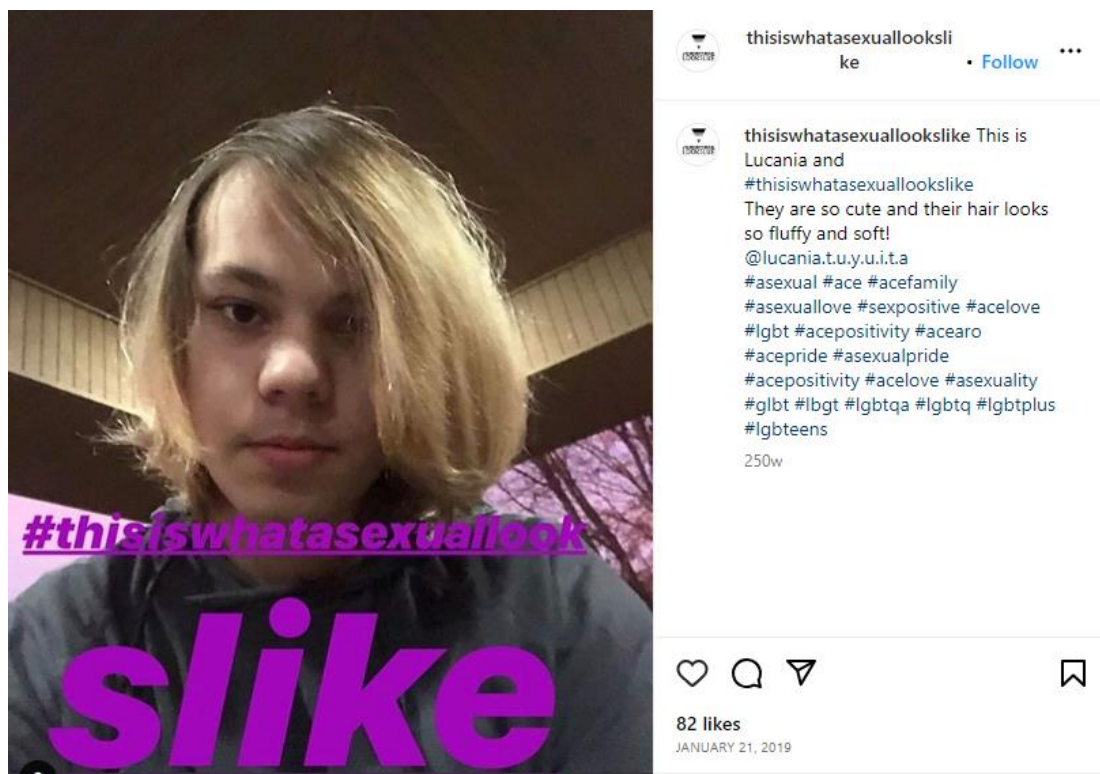

Figure 62: Lucania uses they/them and neopronouns (zey/zem) (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 21 January 2019. Screenshot by the author.

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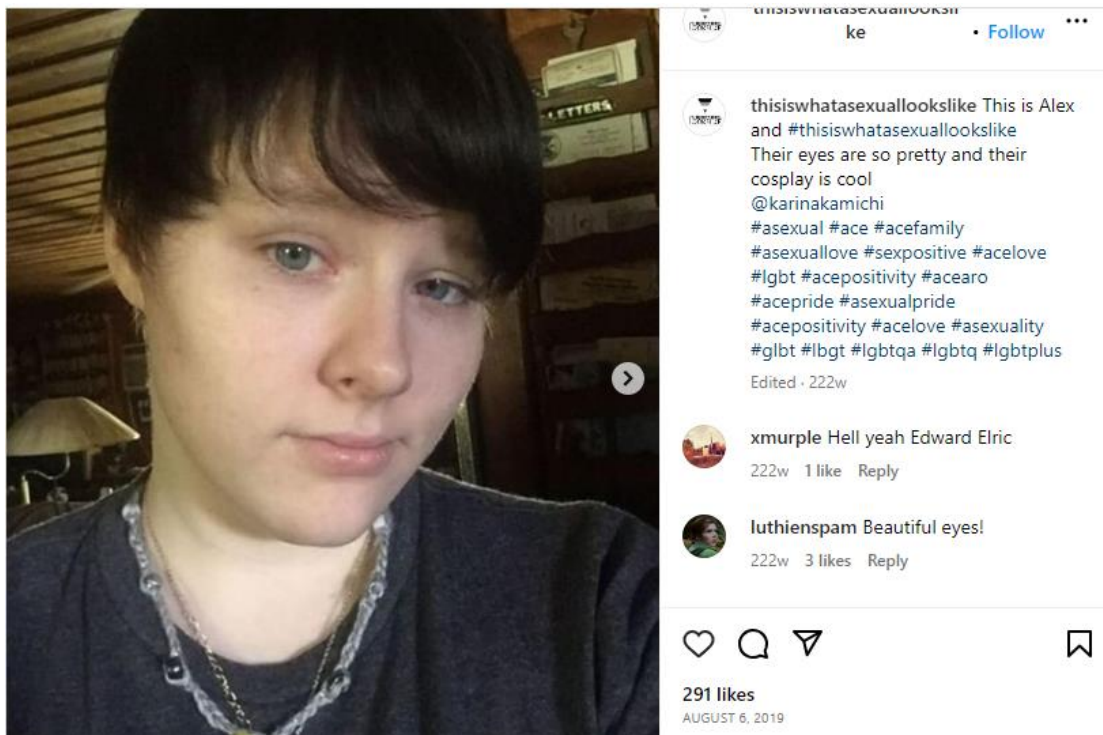
Figure 63: Alex uses she/they pronouns (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 6 August 2019. Screenshot by the author.

The asexuals who form part of this trope represent their asexuality through their faces: each image is composed of their faces and the upper part of their shoulders. These images resemble portraits, and in this case, self-portraits, as their faces take up much of the space of their pictures. All these non-binary individuals wear shirts covering the upper half of their bodies, and the only visible skin forms part of their faces and necks. One of these individuals includes their hands in their self-representations of asexuality: Kody (Figure 61) has their hands positioned close to their mouth. These non-binary individuals do not have overly exaggerated facial expressions: Kody and Lucania (Figure 52) have neutral facial expressions that do not signify any emotions. Alex (Figure 63) has their lips slightly turned up, which can be read as a smirk or a gentle smile. Kody and Lucania's images are aided by intertextuality, with both images having edited texts that communicate their asexuality. All individuals' backgrounds are only slightly visible. Through their face-focused imagery, these non-binary asexuals use their faces as transmitters: through a combination of image and text presented through a virtual asexual community, their faces semiotically symbolise their asexuality through non-verbal communication.

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These self-represented non-binary asexuals ensure that their faces, and therefore their asexuality, are the focal point of their picture. The use of an up-close, face-centred image is a rather intimate type of shot – we are granted permission to explore their face, which is arguably the most aesthetically unique feature we have. We are able to zoom into the image and analyse every detail of the face and let our imagination create fictional stories about these strangers. While positioning their faces as a site for meaning-making, non-binary asexuals restrict the viewer from anything below their shoulders. It has been argued that it is an excruciating task to escape the notions of masculinity and femininity, and thus, to uphold a non-binary identity, the individuals in this trope engage in radical self-representative practices to position themselves outside gender categories. Butler argues that "…the category of sex is presumed already to have marked that individual body which is, as it were, delivered up to the symbolic law to receive its mark" (Butler 2011:62). These symbolic marks consist of a set of heteronormative gender expectations that act to normalise what bodies should look like and how they should behave.

Semiotically, bodies become both the signifiers and the signified: they are mimetic while also understood as signs that need to be decoded. By way of this, sexual and gender norms have inherently, through symbolic interventions, tainted human bodies (Butler 2011:62). Despite orientating one's identity outside of traditional gender norms, materialisations of masculinity and femininity remain ingrained in the body. Further, Butler (2011:6) argues that "to be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the 'quite masculine' and the 'quite feminine'". To attempt to situate oneself outside of these gender norms requires a refusal of gender binary categories, and this can be carried out through reformulations of existing social norms (Butler 2004:7). Norms are not fixed – they can renegotiate themselves through changing and evolving social realities. Butler (2004:31,41) suggests that by using a nuanced, legitimating gender identification that redefines the gender matrix, the standards of normalisation can be altered. Therefore, bodies and the identities they represent have the power to redefine the current naturalisation of gender role performances that exist and hold power in all social environments. Those who fall within this trope actively deny their bodies the power to counteract their non-binary identities.

Choosing to identify with their faces symbolically diminishes the power that traditional gender ideologies and assumptions have on identities. As a unique characteristic of this trope, the face is able to stand alone and act as the body. The face becomes a "system of representation" (Hall

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1997:4) in which it iconically and mimetically stands in for the body. This further produces a protected utopian-like representational space, where each individual is able to practice self-autonomy by pre-determining how they would like their physical manifestation to be represented and interpreted. Butler (2004:29) refers to this type of gender deconstruction as "fantasy". She states that, "fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as constitutive outside". The "fantasy" of non-binarisation is manifested into reality through this trope. This is a powerful type of self-expression as it allows not only for an insight into the spectrum of asexuality, but it also works toward the legitimising of asexuality as a unique sexual orientation. Through the privileging of the face, the potential for unwanted sexual remarks is also diminished. These asexual individuals create new boundaries relating to intimacy, creating a representational space where they can feel safe to express themselves outside of compulsory heterosexuality. Non-binary asexuals that form part of this trope are able to establish new gender identities through their reiterated embodied visualities - visualities that do not prioritise the body and its current traditional gendered attributes.

Furthermore, the images in this trope resemble staged headshots, where each individual practices self-governmental autonomy. The clothing that they wear is not depicted and, thus, does not play a part in how they perform their digital asexual identities. Apparel is a form of self-presentation that works alongside "systems of representation" to construct and transmit meaning (Hall 1997:5). Clothing is a linguistic code: in Western societies, clothing trends correlate with traditionally held gender ideologies (Hall 1997:37). If these images were to contain slivers of individuals preferred apparel, then it becomes easier for viewers to decode these items and read them as signs of familiar traditional gender identities. By representing themselves through bodiless narratives, non-binary asexuals minimise the potential for misgendering or invalidating non-binarisation as an identity. If one can deny and refuse to acknowledge an identifier such as a non-binary identity, then asexuality as a minority identification can also easily be seen as illegitimate, unnatural and, in turn, erased. The careful steps that the individuals in this trope use to represent themselves digitally, lead to the uniqueness of the non-binary asexual becoming a legitimate, recognised subgroup of asexuality.

As I have contended, asexuality offers an opportunity to reconstruct the ways that individuals present themselves and the ways that they practice relating to others. This trope exposes an

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additional form of self-expression: these individuals create physical boundaries between their lived, personal experiences by exclusively centring their aesthetic representation on their faces. Interestingly, and why I refer to these images as being headshot-like, is because viewers are not granted access to the backgrounds of these non-binary asexuals. Asexuality, as well as other minority identities, are often marked by discrimination (Scherrer 2008:622). One reason that these non-binary individuals may remove access to their backgrounds may be to protect themselves from potential violence, as resisting ideological norms by outwardly positioning oneself as the Other opens oneself up to "social sanctions and violence" (Downing 2013b:528).

Through the construction of this trope, asexuality creates a new way to challenge stereotyped, fixed gender identities and norms. To perform gender identities, Butler (2004:31) believes that there are "new" genders and gender identities that exist outside the gender matrix. However, for these genders to be destabilised and further legitimised, there needs to be new, alternative norms that co-exist to contest existing gender categories. I believe that throughout this trope, it is evident that non-binary asexuality presents a nuanced way of self-expression, one that prioritises self-governing autonomy. This trope allows us to see the power that asexuality holds and that it has the potential to create and further legitimise alternative ways of being human. Disengaging from social norms does not mean that one needs to be negatively Othered – it is clear that through difference, a turn to necessary, natural, and legitimate heterogeneous gender identities can exist.

3.3.3 *Banding with the LGBTQIA+ banner*

The asexuals that fall into this trope (Figures 64-67), band with the LGBTQIA+ banner, using LGBTQIA+ signifiers to illustrate their connection to the LGBTQIA+ community. This is shown through the adoption of LGBTQIA+ symbols into their self-representations of asexuality. The amalgamation of these symbolic cultural codes into their self-representations symbolises the allyship among these asexuals and the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. All individuals within this trope are smiling, and their faces and the upper halves of their bodies take up the majority of the compositions of their pictures. Their chosen LGBTQIA+ symbols are worn on their bodies: Jana (Figure 64) incorporates the physical icon of the traditional rainbow flag into her self-representation. Eli (Figure 65) and Alex (Figure 66) make indexical use of the rainbow's colouring by incorporating elements of the flag into the garments they wear. Alex's shirt is assumed to read "Why is straight the default?", a common phrase used in LGBTQIA+

advocacy,[63] branding and merchandise. Rebekah's (Figure 67) self-representation utilises her phone case, decorated with the two interlocking female symbols, symbolising lesbianism. The design also includes the colours of the rainbow flag.

Figure 64: Jana, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 26 March 2020. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 65: Eli, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 19 December 2019. Screenshot by the author.

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[63] An online search of "Why is straight the default?" brings up a plethora of t-shirts and other LGBTQIA+ merchandise that are decorated with the same phrasing.

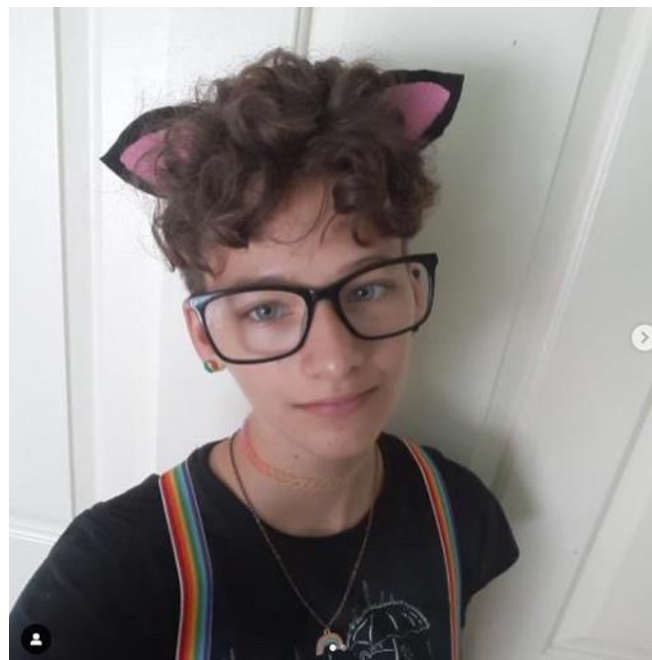Figure 66: Alex, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 2 June 2019. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 67: Rebekah, posted by Asexual Looks (@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram), 29 November 2019. Screenshot by the author.

Those that form part of this trope receive a sense of positive endorsement from the LGBTQIA+ community, and through the range of sexual and non-sexual attitudes, attractions, and

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orientations found within the acronym, these asexuals strive for a coalition site for community building and social secureness (Carrigan 2011:476; Cerankowski & Milks 2010:660; MacInnis & Hodson 2012:728; Scherrer 2008:623). There is evidence that shows asexuals find community amongst the LGBTQIA+ groups, implying that the adoption within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum is not at odds with asexuality (Carroll 2019:9; Przybylo 2019:88; Rothblum *et al* 2020:761; Scherrer 2008:635; Thorpe & Arbeau 2020:311). Both asexual and LGBTQIA+ identities have been faced with historic and recurring discrimination and stigmatisation; however, the LGBTQIA+ community has a more robust social profile, one that allows for social detectability (Gross 1991:20; MacNeela & Murphy 2015:801).

The LGBTQIA+ community exists in tangible and intangible realms and is universally understood to exist in society. Popular LGBTQIA+ cultural symbols such as the rainbow flag are physical placeholders for queerness. These material and symbolic items sustain LGBTQIA+ identities, and through a reiteration of these particular images and symbols, the group is easily recognised (Hall 1996:2). The asexuals that form part of this trope acknowledge that these tangible cultural symbols form part of "collective representations", sign-systems that work to non-verbally naturalise LGBTQIA+ into society (Barthes 1991 [1957]:8). The asexuals in this trope show an awareness of the power imbalance between dominant, well-recognised LGBTQIA+ identities and other minority identities that form part of the LGBTQIA+ acronym: they realise that although asexuality can be understood as something queer in relation to heteronormativity, dominant groups such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people (LGBT) hold more power in the LGBTQIA+ hierarchy. They recognise these to be powerful signs and assimilate them into their visual, digitised asexual identities. These asexuals construct their asexual identities on the back of the LGBTQIA+ group's legitimacy recognition, with its "natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (Hall 1996:2). According to Hall (1996:4), "identities are about questions using the resources of history, language and culture in a process of becoming rather than being not," and therefore, identities are formed within and not outside, representations. These repeated cultural representations lead to the agentic banding with the LGBTQIA+ group and illustrate a vital need to overcome social threats of invisibility by being asexual in an inclusive, safe space, a space that grants observable social validation (Meyer 2017:333; Scherrer 2008:622).

Social media platforms provide opportunities to perform one's identity in a way that may not be possible in real-life instances (Kim & Chock 2017:561). These asexual individuals self-

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construct their asexual identities by claiming representational agency: they take on the role of the curator, using reiterations of LGBTQIA+ cultural symbols to perform their asexuality. They achieve this by wearing these physical manifestations of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. This, in turn, leads to a transition from a state of powerlessness into a state of empowerment. For these individuals, their curated selfies "transcend" traditionally held cultural and sexual norms (Iqani & Schroeder 2015:405). Iqani and Schroeder (2015:412) state that curated images "do not simply represent re-existing selves, individual and collective, but constitute such selves in the very process of representing them." For these asexuals, their use of social media facilitates identity-related support from a place of similarity – the LGBTQIA+ community. By wearing LGBTQIA+ cultural symbols, these asexuals equate their association with the LGBTQIA+ community to lower levels of in-group stigmatisation and higher levels of community connectedness (Chan 2022:3). This allows validation and social acceptance.

Discovering a like-minded community profoundly affects minority-identified individuals as it facilitates self-clarification and self-acceptance through a sense of a shared communal trait (Carrigan 2011:475). In this sense, asexuality, as an expression of non-sexuality, represents a vital aspect of sexuality, one that is found within the LGBTQIA+ community and one that can facilitate easing anxieties caused by compulsory sexuality. Therefore, by finding community among the LGBTQIA+ acronym, asexuals weigh in-group approval over out-group discrimination when making sense of their socially mediated identities (Dawson *et al* 2019:9; MacInnis & Hodson 2012:728). The asexuals in this trope view the LGBTQIA+ community almost as an assimilation minority group: forming part of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum connects individuals to the social experience of the group, and they stress a common queer sameness over a sexual difference (Scherrer 2008:622; Sullivan 2003:24). Thus, for the asexual individuals who form part of this trope, the LGBTQIA+ community becomes a place of refuge: a communal entity that has historically demanded recognition and validation through the incentive of visibility and legitimacy in parallel to its heterosexual counterpart.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on exploring the different identities that encompass asexuality through the exploration of a sample of examples of representations of asexuality. This chapter has been concerned with the ways that asexuals incorporate their asexuality into their social media accounts. These asexuals strive to represent their asexual identities in personalised,

curated posts. Moreover, through the analysis of these representations of asexuality, it becomes clear that asexuality works towards deconstructing heteronormative ideologies: through simple portrayals of asexual individuals, through their embodied asexual identities and alongside captions that express their asexuality, asexuality disrupts what is understood to be 'sexual' and 'de-sexualised'.

In the first section of this chapter, I critique public personas of asexuality. These personas are described to be complex, large identities that are formed through the collection of a multitude of other identities. Common amongst the public personas that have been investigated is that all three individuals incorporated asexuality into their online presence. The individuals discussed in this section, namely Yasmin Benoit (asexual activist), Michelle Lin (asexual activist) and Venus Envy (drag performer), are all found to be popular asexual advocates. These individuals play a vital role in introducing asexuality to non-asexual spaces to generate inclusivity and destigmatisation for asexuality. Ideally, these public personas of asexuality work to provide much needed representations of asexuality on Twitter and Instagram. Both Michelle Lin and Venus Envy are praised by other asexuals. Asexuals are shown to have their own asexual identities validated through the public personas of asexuality. These users find these public personas to elicit feelings of self-acceptance and they thank both individuals for humanising asexuality. Other asexuals are shown to be familiar with and knowledgeable of the spectrum of asexuality, and they are therefore able to identify with Lin and Envy's complex public asexual personas.

This chapter reveals that non-asexuals are unable to identify with and understand public personas of asexuality. Users use harmful heterosexual myths of asexuality to dismiss Benoit, Lin and Envy. It becomes clear that their complex identities heighten asexual discrimination. Both Benoit and Lin are self-identified asexual activists that are shown to have multiple identities that interact with their asexuality. The reaction to their representations of asexuality are surrounded by discrimination and oppression, and it becomes clear that asexuality is unable to be conceptualised when it is not one's central identifier. Their public personas of asexuality cannot be understood, and therefore their asexuality is pathologised and both are labelled as non-LGBTQIA+ individuals. This labelling is shown to delegitimise and stigmatise asexuality as a sexual orientation, labelling asexuality as an identification that falls outside of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

Additionally, Benoit and Envy both experience unwanted sexualisation despite explicitly incorporating their asexuality into their public personas. Non-asexual individuals are unable to conceptualise an asexual that navigates their asexuality alongside traditional sexual and gender norms, and therefore, Benoit and Envy are seen as sexual deviants. Their asexual identities are too complicated, and this leads them to experience asexual discrimination and pathology. It is evident that some individuals are unable to separate themselves from their predisposed beliefs about asexuality, femininity, self-performance and online personas, disallowing these non-asexual users to understand their digital asexual advocacy.

It is important to note that, in all three of these initial representations of asexuality, the bodies shown are femme-presenting bodies. These women that embody their asexual agencies utilise their bodies to represent their personal asexual identities. It is evident that misogynistic, male-gaze orientated perspectives are at play in the reactions to these public personas of asexuality: women's bodies are seen to be inherently sexual, and by simply stating that one is not sexual is not enough. These representations of asexuality are unable to disrupt traditional norms that surround women's compulsory sexuality. Through missing explanations of what asexuality means or why these public figures identify as asexual, non-asexual users immediately associate asexuality as a challenge to heterosexuality. Some users slut-shame these public figures, while others dismiss asexuality as a legitimate identity that can be taken up by women. Other users replicate discriminating statements that have been used that link asexuality with pathology, sexual deviance, attention seeking, and violence. In this sense, asexuality can only be validated if it is forcibly imposed onto a woman's body.

Nonetheless, these women take control of their own asexual identities, and do not shy away from representing their asexuality. The misinterpretation of asexuality, although harmful and dismissive, does not deter these women from captioning their images in a prideful, purposeful way that promotes the visibility of asexuality. In turn, all these images have received comments of support and appreciation from asexual users. These public representations of asexuality aid in the self-validation and self-acceptance of those that form part of the asexual spectrum. These representations further contribute to the normalisation of asexuals in queer, LGBTQIA+ spaces and although there is apprehension from some non-asexual, these representations have been validated by other LGBTQIA+ users. Thus, through representations that exist on social media platforms, asexuality becomes assimilated within the LGBTQIA+ acronym.

Furthermore, this chapter set out to critique the ways that asexuals navigate their self-representations in a digitised asexual space. The safe space created by the owners of @thisiswhatasexuallookslike has facilitated a type of 'coming out' process for asexuals by providing them with an opportunity to portray themselves as asexual with a reduced fear of judgement. As the account owner states, this asexual community has succeeded in providing a safe space for asexuals. The page destabilises the stereotyped, mostly negative assumptions of asexuality that is evident through the examination of Benoit, Lin and Envy, and provides a multitude of experiential asexual representations.

The page becomes a site of education, where people from all walks of life can be met with asexuality in a naturalised manner. Different asexual identities are expanded upon, and within the safety of the community, members feel comfortable to explore their own asexuality and asexuality as a sexual orientation. Asexuality confronts the notions of heteronormativity and the sexual assumption, and those who self-identify as asexual actively seek out alternative ways to visually represent the asexual identities. Therefore, these online representations validate asexuality in an indispensable way, corroborating asexuality as a valid sexual orientation and identifier. Through this comprehensive analysis and the establishment of three asexual tropes, the experiential diversity of asexuality becomes visible. The tropes constructed in this section reveals how multifaceted asexuality is as identity group. Previous research that has concluded that the majority of asexuals are assigned female at birth (AFAB), identify as female and use she/her pronouns (Osterwald 2017; Robbins *et al* 2016; Rothblum *et al* 2020; Antonsen *et al* 2020; Weis *et al* 2021) however, the three tropes that have been investigated in this chapter offer insight into the lives of other asexual groups.

Due to their identification outside of heteronormativity, asexual theory suggests that asexuals may explore different gender identities (MacNeela & Murphy 2015:800). MacNeela and Murphy (2015:800) argue that an asexual identity may threaten the heteronormative matrix because it "threatens the stability of traditional gender role identification". It is evident that the individuals that self-represent their asexual identities view their gender and sexual identities as distinct entities and see their asexual identifications as a vessel to "free them from traditional gender expectations" (Carroll 2019:14). This becomes evident within this chapter, as asexuals who form part of each of the presented tropes actively seek to renegotiate themselves through and outside the heterosexist, heteronormative gender ideologies that traditionally allow for identification to be materialised. By looking at asexuality in a non-essentialist way, the

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exploration of self-represented asexual personas provides insight into the multitude of the asexual experience. Through a critical understanding of societal normalisations and stereotyped behaviours, asexuals pursue multidimensional identifiers that actively work to reject the sexual assumption, compulsory sexuality and sexual and gender hierarchies. These tropes show us that it is possible to establish unique asexual identities within representational spaces.

The charming striplings reject traditional gender roles through their representation of asexuality. They represent themselves according to their own sets of beliefs which results in the renegotiation of what it means to be 'masculine'. They reject sexual norms and disallow for themselves to be sexualised as objects of desire. Rather, these young asexual men are charming, and through their asexual masculinity, these asexuals court other Instagram users. Additionally, non-binary-asexuals establish an asexual representation that is a bodiless, face-orientated, embodied visual representation of one's identifiers. Through the means of their androgynous faces and headshots as a vessel for their identities, non-binary asexuals can self-govern their autonomy through instances of free agency. Through their visual imagery, these non-binary asexuals bring with them a sense of familiarity, which can be due to the intimacy created by the vulnerability of their emphasised faces, but can also be attributed to the normalcy of the background in each image. Instagram users can envision them or someone similar to them, someone they know in their personal lives, who shares a similar set of asexual and gender markers. This is vital for LGBTQIA+ youth as the media is a primary site of meaning-production regarding LGBTQIA+ identities (McInroy & Craig 2017:33).

This chapter has also been concerned with asexuals that combine cultural LGBTQIA+ symbolism into their asexual representations. Through their banding with the LGBTQIA+ community, these individuals show an understanding of the existing binarisation of heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories that hold their own desexualising and hypersexualising powers. For the asexuals that band with the LGBTQIA+ banner, their embodied asexual identities take advantage of traditionally held sexual categories, allowing for asexual visibility and security amongst other LGBTQIA+ identities.

It should be noted that the self-representations found throughout this chapter should not be understood as the establishment of a set of distinct stereotyped visual appearances, but rather,

as a set of examples of how self-representations of asexuality function within existing social structures.

Thus, the visual representations of asexual identities found within this chapter actively work against repeated, one-dimensional stereotypes that impact the way that asexuality is seen in society. As I have discussed, having a relatable representation of a similar or the same identity allows for intra-personal validation. These representations also have the power to provide social acceptance amongst non-asexuals, enhancing asexuality as a unique, legitimate sexual orientation. As discussed in previous chapters, mass media asexual representations often contribute to already existing tropes about the romantic and sex lives of asexual individuals, painting them in mostly closed, negative lights. These varied representations that are found within this chapter introduce alternative, diversified representations of asexuality. Although positioned as Othered, asexual identities found within this chapter portray positive experiences of being different from the norm.

By providing a multitude of representations of asexuality, this chapter works to highlight the diversity of asexual identities, leading to a future that further legitimises asexuality as a sexual identity. It is pertinent for future research to explore asexuality in a way that encompasses all asexual identities to build on realistic and inclusive asexual literature. Through the representations of asexuality on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, the varied experience of asexuality becomes visible. Instead of the continuous reiteration of repeated heterosexist myths of asexuality, this chapter allows for the denaturalising of a fixed, essentialist view of asexuality. The aforementioned representations of asexuality work hand-in-hand towards freeing asexuality from traditionally held sexual and gender beliefs, offering a positive form of Othering that is not oppressive, dehumanising or restrictive.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

4.1   Summary of Chapters

Chapter one set forth to lay the foundation of the study, heedfully grounding the analysis of a plethora of asexual representations in select examples of visual culture at the study's main aim. This chapter introduces a review of a large portion of existing asexual literature. This literature review provided insight into the lived experiences of asexuals and the ways that they renegotiated their asexual identifiers in a compulsory heterosexual matrix. The exclusion of asexuality in the LGBTQIA+ community is explored and is discussed through sub-themes that are interested in the self-identification processes of asexuals, asexuality as a unique sexual orientation, and the fundamental relationship between asexuality and the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Furthermore, historical and social commonality amongst asexual and LGBTQIA+ identities are established.

By reviewing the literature found within this chapter, the complex spectrum that is asexuality is investigated. Further, this chapter introduced literature concerned with traditional and contemporary media, paying close attention to the influence that media representations have on minority sexual orientations and how these depictions work to legitimise marginalised sexual groups. This revealed pervasive stereotypes, tropes and myths that continue to plague media representations of asexuality and other LGBTQIA+ identifiers. In addition, this review looked at the increased representations of LGBTQIA+ in the media, drawing attention to the importance of diversified, realistic depictions of sexual minorities. Lastly, the literature review consulted representations of LGBTQIA+ identities and asexuality found on social media platforms. Online spaces encompass diversified identities, leading to a heterogeneity of asexual and other LGBTQIA+ representations. In doing this, literature is consulted that presents the ways that asexuals and other sexual minorities employ these platforms in order to curate their online representations in such a manner that facilitates self-acceptance in a safe space, while also establishing greater validation within supportive online communities.

Furthermore, the chapter introduced a queer theoretical framework that is utilised throughout the study. Throughout this study, a queer theoretical framework and asexual theory have been employed. This allowed for a rereading of traditional social systems and allowed asexuality to be investigated. Finally, chapter one introduces the research methodology that inform the study.

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These methodologies are employed as a means to decode, interpret and understand the asexual representations found within visual culture.

Chapter two is positioned to critically analyse representations of asexuality that are found within televised media. This chapter analysed a variety of asexual characters namely: Gerald Tippett from *Shortland Street* (Hollings *et al* 1992), Brad from *Faking It* (Goodman & Wolov 2014), Beth from *The March Family Letters* (Shelson 2014), Florence Simmons and Steve Morley from *Sex Education* (Nunn 2019-), Rue Bennett from *Euphoria* (Levinson 2019-) and Todd from *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg 2014-2020). A two-tiered analysis was conducted for each character: firstly, each character was semiotically analysed, allowing for visual characterisations, and myths of tropes to be investigated. Secondly, utilising a sex critical approach, each asexual representation's characterisation and storyline was critiqued according to existing myths of asexuality.

Chapter two began by contextualising mainstream traditional media, specifically television, as a site which reiterates, empowers and popularises societal, political, structural and cultural institutions. Further, this chapter explored the importance of representations in the media, with a focus on representations of LGBTQIA+ identities and asexuality in television. Historical depictions of LGBTQIA+ and asexuality were discussed, implicating the potential harm that these presentations have on those with minority sexual identifiers. Well-rounded, complex and diversified representations were introduced as empowering alternatives to traditional depictions of marginalised sexualities. Therefore, this chapter critiqued negative and positive myths of asexuality that were found within the sample of representations of asexuality.

On the one hand, asexuality remains pathologised, misunderstood and limited to an 'interesting' personality flaw. This chapter found that asexuality remains seen as something to be 'cured', with an underlying reasoning for its existence. Asexual characters are visualised as 'different' and are opposed to their heterosexual counterparts: they are Othered through their stereotyped visual appearances. Many of the asexuals are reduced to background characters that exist merely to enhance the storylines of the non-asexuals, leading these characters to be seen as token 'asexuals' and only recognised through their asexual label. This chapter provided evidence of ace-baiting, whereby asexuality was alluded to but was not elaborated on, and those who were presented as asexual portrayed a one-dimensional asexual journey. Asexuality was often introduced by just its name and was not explored upon. Therefore, televised

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representations of asexuality are limited to fragments of asexuality. Asexuality also lacked legitimisation, and other non-asexual characters to dismissed character's asexual identities.

On the other hand, televised representations of asexuality provided positive, realistic and different ways of seeing and understanding asexuality. Most characters were conscious of and accepted their asexual identity. Asexuality was a legitimate sexual orientation for these characters. The representations of asexuality discussed in this chapter experienced similar discourses that are reflected in lived asexual experiences. Furthermore, this chapter presented diversified representations of asexuality. The representations that were analysed in this chapter differed in appearance, storylines, genres, visualisations, time periods and places of origins. The portrayal of the heterogenous asexual spectrum does not limit asexuality to one type of representation. Importantly, *BoJack Horseman* was discussed as a series that diversified asexuality by providing a nuanced way of representation: asexuality was not limited to one character, nor was it briefly touched on. In the series, Todd was presented as a well-rounded main character: his asexual journey unfolded throughout the series, and his asexuality was accepted and validated. The secondary asexual characters were shown to be dynamic and were portrayed similarly to other non-asexual secondary characters. Through the consultation of the asexual insider, asexuality became visually humanised. Asexuality found within *BoJack Horseman* presented different ways of relating that are not strictly bound to asexuals. In essence, this chapter provided guidelines toward representing the multidimensional nature of asexuality.

Chapter three set out to analyse representations of asexuality found on social media platforms, specifically on Twitter and Instagram. The analysis found within this chapter consisted of an in-depth investigation of the ways that asexuals represent their asexual identities online. A semiotic and hermeneutic analysis of each representation was undertaken to identify significant stereotypes, tropes and myths of asexuality that have been concealed within the select sample of visual signifiers. This followed a critical analysis of each representation of asexuality that critiqued the semiotic findings using relevant asexual and queer theory. The chapter began with a brief introduction to social media platforms and the vital role that they play in the construction and representation of online (and offline) personas. Social media platforms were highlighted as a site that offered asexual individuals an opportunity to curate their digital asexual personas. Through a highly personalised process these individuals crafted a distinctly embodied self that was unique to asexuality. Maintaining an embodied representation of asexuality was argued to

be a powerful self-expressive exercise that asexual individuals practiced in order to establish themselves in a digital, visual world. These personal representations demonstrated how each individual interpreted their asexual identity and the way that they wished to be virtually interpreted by others. Further, this method of self-representation was shown to allow like-minded accounts to come together to form online communities, leading to interpersonal validation amongst online asexuals.

Subsequently, this chapter presented two types of online representations of asexuality categories, namely public persona representations of asexuality and self-representations of asexuality. The former was explored by investigating select digital examples from public figures, namely Yasmin Benoit (@theyasminbenoit on Instagram and Twitter), Venus Envy (@VenusEnvyDrag on Twitter, @venusenvydrag on Instagram) and Michelle Lin (on @LGBT's Instagram account). This chapter found that these public figure, content-creator based representations did not platform well: each examined individual had a set of complex identifiers that were not purely limited to asexuality, making it incomprehensible to depict an embodied asexual identity. Through their heightened complex identities, these individuals who attempted to present their public asexual personas were often reduced to dismissive tropes, stereotypes and myths of asexuality that were found amongst character-like asexual representations. Public persona representations of asexuality were observed to be larger-than-asexual identities and were vehemently met with narratives that delegitimised asexuality. This perplexing outcome was illustrated through negative, harmful and repudiated comments left by other social media users. This chapter demonstrated that public persona representations of asexuality invalidated asexuality, and deducing that asexuality needed an alternative way to establish itself online.

Consequently, the second category of asexual representations, namely self-representations of asexuality, presented a more positive outcome for asexuality's online presence. This category explored Asexual Looks (on Instagram @thisiswhatasexuallookslike) and introduced the noteworthy value that self-representation has for asexuality. This category was accompanied by three uniquely asexual tropes that aimed to document the experiential diversity of asexuality. These tropes presented the online manifestations of asexual-masculinity, non-binary asexuals and asexuals that banded with LGBTQIA+ symbols. The tropes delved into the unique ways asexuals digitally embodied their asexual identifiers and paid close attention to the notable tactics they made use of when representing their physical asexual appearance to

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the public. Therefore, this chapter maintained that those who self-identify within the asexual spectrum navigated online spaces through an asexual lens. These self-representations of asexuality were shown to freely explore their digital asexual representations: asexual representations were no longer fixed to previous limited generalisations and reiterations that sought to delegitimise asexuality as a sexual identifier. Rather, this chapter discovered that self-representations of asexuality validate asexuality as an accepted sexual orientation and identifier. In essence, the asexual identities that were explored throughout this category portrayed positive asexual experiences, further visualising a multitude of lived, experiential self-identified representations of asexuality.

4.2   Contributions of the Study

This study contributed representations from different asexual perspectives and explored a plethora of visual representations of asexuality that are found in media. Through the investigation of different types of representations of asexuality, both online and on television, this study contributed to a broader understanding of the extensive, diversified spectrum of asexuality. Additionally, in relation to the complex nature of asexuality that was explored throughout this study, the dissertation relied on self-identified asexuals, both represented in television and on social media platforms.[64] Self-representation has been shown to be vital throughout this study. This study assisted in highlighting the importance of self-governed autonomy in light of representations of asexuality by presenting the unique ways that asexuals non-verbally communicate and negotiate their embodied asexual identities. This study contributed to the exploration of online self-represented asexuals. The agentic intimacy boundaries that are established through their redefined notions of masculinity, their face-focused androgynous headshots, and their symbol-assisted online manifestations allowed them to maintain their personalised asexual identifiers, allowing them to exist in virtual representational spaces. Furthermore, this study confirmed that asexuals that form part of online spaces feel both inter- and intra-personal validation when surrounded by similar self-representations.

The representations of asexuality that are found within this study, as well as within the field of asexuality research, collectively work to introduce asexuality to a wider audience. Therefore, this dissertation provided a well-rounded visualisation of asexuality in visual culture. This

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[64] With one exception being Rue Bennet from *Euphoria*.

study explored the complex asexual spectrum that consists of a multitude of gender identities, sexual and romantic relationships, and attractions. It is acknowledged that visibility in media, despite the accurateness or complexity of the representation, is important in destigmatising and validating asexuality. In essence, through its extensive analyses of representations of asexuality, this study contributed towards the acceptance of asexuality as a sexual orientation.

4.3   Limitations of the Study

This dissertation focused on exploring a set of select representations of asexuality found within television series' and on Twitter and Instagram. Therefore, this study does not look at representations of asexuality found on other social media platforms such as Facebook or Tumblr, nor does it investigate representations that are in art, videogames, documentaries or in films. This limitation disallows for other representations of asexuality to be critiqued. The representations of asexuality that have been investigated in this study were limited to a semiotic and hermeneutic analysis, and therefore, a discourse analysis or content analysis have not been conducted.

4.4   Suggestions for Future Research

Asexuality as a relatively newly discussed topic provided the opportunity for many subsequent studies. The literature review that was presented in this dissertation may elicit interesting areas of research surrounding asexual identity formation, asexuality and gender self-presentations, asexuality and age, asexual relationships and asexual communities to name a few.

As this study has been limited to representations of asexuality found on television, Twitter and Instagram, asexual research may be enriched through the exploration of representations of asexuality in broader visual culture. Suggested research avenues are representations of asexuality that exist on TikTok, Facebook, Tumblr, in art, videogames, documentaries, films and music.

The literature reviewed in this study may also present gaps of unresearched asexuality such as South African representations of asexuality. An autoethnography that situates asexuality in a South African context would be beneficial in exploring asexuality in Africa. These gaps in literature have the potential to expose important elements of asexuality that might lead to a future of legitimisation for asexuality as a sexual orientation.

The multifaceted nature of asexuality needs to be understood, and asexual research should seek out asexuality that exists throughout the world. Well-rounded research of asexuality contributes to the body of knowledge that surrounds asexuality, which in turn, can lead to greater awareness and long-term social acceptance.

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