

Negotiating Asexual Identity in r/asexuality

A Bachelor's Thesis in Sociology



ABSTRACT

With asexual (“ace”) people making up a minority even within queer communities, the internet has become a vital space for ace people to interact with the asexual community. In recent years, the Reddit forum r/asexuality has become the most active discursive space surrounding asexual identity, with over 230,000 members. Existing literature has theorized asexual identity formation through the lens of “discovery,” wherein individuals come to identify as ace after “discovering” the label (often via online spaces) and using it to understand their deviant experiences and desires—or, more precisely, their lack thereof. However, identity formation is a process that stretches beyond discovery of the asexual label as people negotiate complex experiences of doubt, reaffirmation, and validation. I argue that emergent online spaces such as r/asexuality play a key role in mediating these processes of identity negotiation. Through qualitative interviews with members of the r/asexuality community, I examine how ace people make sense of their role(s) in r/asexuality as they engage with the community over time and how these roles facilitate identity negotiation. I find that individuals who are new to r/asexuality see their primary role in the community as observing and learning from others, while members who have spent more time in the subreddit described their role as supporting others and building community. Acting within their respective roles facilitated the identity negotiation processes of both groups in divergent ways. This study broadens scholarly understanding of asexual online communities, which remain understudied in social scientific research.

Keywords: Asexuality, online forums, identity formation

INTRODUCTION

Asexual (“ace”) people turn to online spaces to find community and develop their identities, given that their status as a minority among sexual minorities impedes them from sustaining concentrated in-person communities (Rothblum et al. 2019; Robbins et al. 2015; MacNeela and Murphy 2014). With its forum-style platform, Reddit has become a popular space for the asexual community to interact, from giving advice and developing terminologies to sharing memes (Mollet 2018). One subreddit in particular, r/asexuality, has boomed since its founding in March 2009 to become the most active site for asexual discourse. The subreddit has over 230,000 members and continues to grow, with dozens of new threads and hundreds of comments daily. In r/asexuality, people at various stages of asexual identity formation interact

with each other. From first coming across the term to questioning “Am I asexual?” and beyond, asexual people may find r/asexuality at every stage in their journey.

The definition of asexuality is not stable due to significant diversity within the ace community (Winer 2024). Broadly speaking, asexuality is a sexual orientation characterized by experiencing little to no sexual attraction. While asexuality remains understudied in social scientific research, various scholars have theorized models of asexual identity formation which emphasize the importance of online spaces in “discovering” asexuality (Scherrer 2008; Carrigan 2011; Robbins et al. 2015; Foster et al. 2018). However, many ace people continue to engage with these sites long after originally coming to identify as asexual. Online spaces like r/asexuality facilitate social learning for LGBTQ individuals as they access information and observe role models (Fox and Ralson 2016). In this study, I interview twelve members of r/asexuality who have been a part of the community for varying amounts of time to better understand how different forms of participation in the subreddit mediate users’ identity negotiation, from initial identification with asexuality and beyond. I ask: How do ace people make sense of their role(s) in r/asexuality as they engage with the community over time, and how do these roles facilitate identity negotiation?

I find that new members of r/asexuality typically engage with the community as “lurkers,” while people who have spent more time in the subreddit primarily assume roles as “supporters.” Acting within these roles facilitates the distinct identity negotiation processes of both groups. For their part, lurkers primarily participate in r/asexuality by observing posts and comments. Through lurking, newer members of the community develop their identities by learning about asexuality. Specifically, lurkers make sense of their identities by learning about differentiated attraction and coming to see asexuality as a diverse spectrum. Supporters, on the

other hand, view their primary role as providing information, emotional support, and affirmation. Although they are comfortable with their asexuality, supporters reaffirm their identities by participating in a community in which they do not feel alone in their experiences. As supporters engage with r/asexuality, they build a community which meets their need for recognition.

This study contributes to (a)sexuality studies by examining r/asexuality as a site of identity formation beyond initial identification with asexuality, encompassing doubts and (re)affirmations which play out through interactions with the online ace community. Theories of deviance tend to focus on the processes of becoming deviant, rather than the identity work that occurs after people initially adopt their deviant identity (e.g., Becker 1953; Levi 1981; Ebaugh 2013). Thus, this study also contributes to the sociology of deviance more broadly by expanding the scope beyond “becoming.” In addition, this project paints a fuller picture of asexual people as not only information seekers but also as support figures, demonstrating how socially marginalized groups (re)produce knowledge and community.

I begin by turning to the literature. I first examine asexuality as a sexual identity label which people use to make sense of their experiences. Next, I discuss the marginalization of asexuality and how misrecognition influences identity. I then provide historical context about the online ace community and demonstrate the importance of online spaces for the asexual community. From there, I examine theories of asexual identity formation and introduce “identity negotiation” as a term that encompasses the doubts, (re)affirmations, and dilemmas that ace people must negotiate even after initially coming to identify as asexual. After laying out my methods and data collection strategy, I present the findings. I start with the lurkers, describing how they learn through lurking and develop their identities in the process. I then turn to the supporters. I explain how taking part in and building the r/asexuality community facilitates

supporters' identity negotiation. Finally, I discuss the significance of my findings and suggest some paths for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asexuality as an Identity Label

Sexual identity labels represent a complex array of attractions, desires, preferences, and other fleeting biopsychosocial experiences. Behaviors and desires are embedded in normative discourse that assigns labels to individuals to represent their “bodies and pleasures” in an intelligible category, such as gay, straight, or bisexual (Foucault 1990). Thus, sexual identity labels are *approximations* that seek to describe, explain, and justify (a)sexual behaviors and desires. This means that there is no objective “(a)sexuality” for people to discover and identify with. Rather, “an act of identification is . . . a choice to position oneself relative to others who do the same, an invocation of every other invocation of the word” (Coyote 2021). Thus, coming to identify as (a)sexual is an inherently social process.

Identity labels do not simply represent supposedly pre-existing sensations. Sociologists have demonstrated that labeling an experience may, in turn, shape perceptions of that experience. For instance, Becker argues how, through participation in a group with more experienced users, novice marijuana users learn to recognize that physical and psychological sensations caused by marijuana are symptoms of being high and how these users are taught to “regard those ambiguous experiences formerly defined as unpleasant as enjoyable” (Becker 1953, 240). Social interaction plays a key role in facilitating this labeling process, as guidance from experienced

users was crucial for novices to understand that what they were feeling meant they were high. Thus, people assign meaning to bodily sensations by learning from experienced others.

Definitions of asexuality vary and are an ongoing point of contention in asexual communities (Winer 2024). Determining what behaviors count as sexual in the first place is necessary to elaborate an asexual identity, and these negotiations are socially mediated (Scherrer 2008). Ace communities have elaborated ways of differentiating sexual attraction from other forms of attraction such as romantic, platonic, and aesthetic (Winer 2024). Coming to see attraction as differentiated in these ways enables people to “better articulate their experiences with attraction” (Glass 2022, 345). Ace communities have also developed microlabels, identities that relate to or fall under the umbrella of asexuality, that members can use to make sense out of their experiences and mitigate assumptions (Chasin 2014; Glass 2022). For instance, allosexual (non-asexual) people often hold the misconception that asexual people must experience absolutely zero sexual attraction to identify as ace. To manage this assumption, some asexual people identify with microlabels such as demisexual or graysexual to better make sense of their experiences of contingent and/or low sexual attraction (Chasin 2014). In sum, identifying as asexual is an inherently social process that takes place in and with ace communities and in response to allosexual (mis)recognitions.

Asexuality, Misrecognized

Asexual people exist “at the margins of both the heteronormative and the queer worlds” (Tessler and Winer 2023, 14). The ace community is a minority even among the LGBTQ+ community, 1.7% of whom identify as asexual¹ (Rothblum et al. 2019). Unlike more well-known

¹ Research on asexuality has often claimed that asexual people make up 1% of the general population. This statistic is misleading, since it is based on a study that measured the prevalence of British residents who reported

queer communities which face discrimination on the basis of their existence, asexual communities are often ignored altogether. The invisibility of asexuality is a result of allonormativity, societal prejudice that assumes all people experience sexual attraction. Due to the prevalence of allonormativity, even when ace people choose to disclose their identities, they frequently encounter denial (“You just haven’t met the right person yet”) or pathologization (“Maybe you have a condition”). These narratives are “disempowering and undermining, denying asexuality recognition as a meaningful, acceptable orientation” (MacNeela and Murphy 2014, 803).

The relationship between recognition and identity is a long-standing sociological debate: Are our identities dependent on recognition by others, or can we determine our own identities even when we face misrecognition? Du Bois famously straddled these two positions with his theory of “double-consciousness,” wherein the true self struggles against the misperceptions of others (Du Bois 1903, 3). One’s internalized sense of self is distorted when it is reflected back falsely by others. Thus, allonormative misrecognitions may be internalized, leading to doubts and feelings of invalidation (MacNeela and Murphy 2014; Mollet 2018). On the other hand, affirmative recognition from one’s own community may help people clarify their identities and feel more “real.” This study investigates how (mis)recognitions shape the identities of asexual people as they navigate an allonormative world and interact with other ace people on r/asexuality.

Asexuality Online

experiencing no sexual attraction, *not* the percentage of respondents who identify as asexual (Coyote 2022). As of yet, there is no conclusive estimate of how prevalent asexuality is among the general population. Given the results of Rothblum et al.’s study, it is likely much less than 1%.

Online spaces such as r/asexuality are key sites for ace people to interact with the asexual community, as they are primary spaces for learning and teaching about asexuality. Online communities are especially important for members of lesser-represented identity groups such as asexuality because it can be otherwise difficult to find each other (Fox and Ralston 2016). For those with intersecting marginalized identities, online spaces can be even more crucial (Foster et al. 2019). Existing models of asexual identity formation emphasize the importance of the ace community in coming to an asexual identity (Scherrer 2008; Carrigan 2011; Robbins et al. 2015; Foster et al. 2019; MacNeela and Murphy 2014). Fox and Ralston argue that online spaces are crucial sites of social learning where LGBTQ individuals not only access information about identities and resources but also learn through observing role models and via social feedback (Fox and Ralston 2016). Asexuality is defined, negotiated, and debated online, where people collectively (de)construct boundaries and build community.

Since its founding in 2001, the Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN) has been a central hub for asexual people to build community around their shared identity. AVEN's website consists of forums on various topics as well as informational resources. AVEN has been so influential that contemporary definitions of asexuality still reflect the language used by AVEN founder David Jay when he first started the website (Stremel 2022). While AVEN remains a prominent site for the asexual community, discourse about asexuality has shifted onto more contemporary social media platforms such as Tumblr and Reddit (Winer et al. 2022; Mollet 2018). These different ace online communities are not homogenous—ace blogger Coyote points out that there may be significant demographic and political variation across asexual communities, with AVEN having a reputation for being more conservative (Coyote 2021). Despite this variation, the vast majority of existing research on asexuality recruits participants

from AVEN (Winer 2024). While asexual content on Tumblr is dispersed among myriad blogs, Reddit's topic-based forums, or subreddits, aggregate ace experiences and facilitate interaction among users. Created in March 2009, the subreddit r/asexuality has overtaken AVEN to become the most active site for asexual discourse. The forum has over 230,000 members and sees about thirty new threads posted daily, some of which garner dozens of comments and hundreds of upvotes. By focusing on r/asexuality as a unique and influential online ace community, this study fills a significant gap in the literature.

Asexual Identity Formation

Although asexuality remains understudied in social scientific disciplines (Winer 2024), various models of asexual identity formation based on empirical research have been theorized. The first processual formulation of asexual identity development was proposed by Carrigan based on his interview and questionnaire research of asexual people. The model consists of three sequential elements: (1) a sense of individual difference due to a lack of sexual attraction, (2) self-questioning and pathologizing, (3) self-clarification via attaining a communal identity (Carrigan 2011). While Carrigan acknowledges that individual experiences vary, he asserts that this process is a “prevalent trajectory” (Carrigan 2011, 476). Carrigan's model does not extend beyond initial identification as asexual. This limited scope mirrors the “becoming” bias of deviance studies, which tend to focus on the process of becoming deviant rather than the meaning-making and behaviors of people who have already adopted deviant identities (e.g., Becker 1953; Levi 1981; Ebaugh 2013). The focus on “becoming” precludes scholars of deviance from studying the distinct forms of identity work that occur after someone first adopts a deviant identity.

A more expansive model was proposed by Robbins, Low, and Query based on their open-ended survey of participants from three asexual online spaces. In this formulation, which the authors claim “does not necessarily follow a linear progression,” the components are as follows: (1) Identity confusion, (2) discovery of terminology, (3) exploration and education, (4) identity acceptance and salience negotiation, (5) coming out, and (6) identity integration, which may involve “asexual fluidity” and identity experimentation (Robbins et al. 2015). In her study of asexual college students, Mollet proposes an alternative model, which is presented as three cycles that asexual people move within and across with fluidity: (1) gaining awareness of asexuality, (2) identifying with asexuality, and (3) reconciling asexuality (Mollet 2018). Mollet theorizes reconciliation as an ongoing process wherein asexual people navigate allonormativity and its associated doubts and feelings of invalidation (Mollet 2018). My research expands on the above models by examining how interacting with online ace communities facilitates identity development from initial identification to identity integration/reconciliation.

Existing models of asexual identity formation use the language of “discovery” to explain how, by encountering the ace community, asexual people find an identity category that better suits their experiences than more well-known sexuality labels such as straight, gay, or bisexual (Carrigan 2011; Robbins et al. 2015). In Robbins et al.’s model, “discovery of terminology” is its own stage since it is so crucial for a community that does not possess “already available social constructs” as homosexual and bisexual communities do (Robbins et al. 2015, 758). Without knowing that asexuality exists, people are precluded from identifying as ace, so engaging with the asexual community is key. However, the online ace community plays a far more encompassing role in the asexual identity development process than as simply a site for discovering identity terminology. After all, people continue to engage with these spaces long

after they “discover” an asexual identity. Given this continued engagement, I ask how ace people’s conceptions of asexuality develop as they continue to participate in these communities.

Asexual Identity Negotiation

Coming to identify as asexual and continuing to do so is not a foregone conclusion for those who begin the process of asexual identity formation. In their interview study of participants from online ace communities, Scott et al. explore processes of “non-becoming” whereby people who engaged with online asexual communities did not come to identify as ace or came to reject the asexual label after identifying with it for some time (Scott et al. 2016). These individuals found that “certain prescriptions of the identity ... did not resonate with [their] personal experiences,” and as such, dropped off the “becoming” pathway and did not adopt asexuality as a salient aspect of their lives (Scott et al. 2016, 277). Scott et al. analyze identity development beyond discovery, with a focus on those who do not come to identify as asexual after discovering the term. For those who remain on the “becoming” pathway, how do they negotiate their identity as they work through similar challenges of reconciling complex (a)sexual desires and behaviors with a prescriptive identity label?

In this paper, I expand on existing models of asexual identity development by analyzing how online ace communities facilitate processes of identity *negotiation*, whereby ace people continue to do identity work after initially coming to identify as asexual. By using r/asexuality as a research site, I supplement the numerous asexuality studies that have drawn from AVEN by examining Reddit as an increasingly important space for asexual discourse and community. Finally, this study demonstrates how ace people take on roles as learners and supporters as they (re)produce knowledge and community.

DATA AND METHODS

To understand how asexual people negotiate their identities as they interact with the ace community in r/asexuality, I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with twelve members of the subreddit. I chose r/asexuality as my research site because it is the most active space for ace people to interact with each other. The subreddit has over 230,000 members, with dozens active online at any given time. Through creating posts and interacting with them via upvoting/downvoting, commenting, and lurking, users ask for advice, build knowledge, and develop community. While AVEN remains an important discursive site, I chose to focus on r/asexuality because it has grown rapidly in the past decade, overtaking AVEN as the most active online ace community. The volume of daily posts and comments by new and experienced users alike shows that r/asexuality is a significant site not only for questioning people to “discover” the asexual community but also for people who already identify as ace to interact with the community.

Prior to developing an interview protocol, I spent six weeks conducting observations on r/asexuality, treating the forum as a field site. I took notes on patterns, controversies, and popular posts. Throughout the research process, I continued to engage with r/asexuality regularly. These observations informed the entire study, from developing a research question to constructing the interview protocol to analyzing data. Continued engagement with r/asexuality was crucial in designing a study that was relevant to participants and writing in a way that accurately represented the community.

I recruited participants directly from r/asexuality by posting in the forum. Interested individuals were instructed to contact me via Reddit direct message to receive information about the study, including a consent form and intake survey. The intake survey asked respondents to list their Reddit username as well as basic demographic information including age, sexuality, gender, and race. These questions were open-ended so that participants could select labels that best suited their identities. Since existing research on asexuality has had disproportionately White participants (Foster et al. 2019), I prioritized including a diverse range of racial identities in my study. I did this by explicitly addressing ace people of color in my recruitment materials. Regrettably, I still ended up with a majority White sample despite these efforts. This may reflect the demographics of the ace online community, which studies have suggested is disproportionately White (Winer 2024). Similarly, the gender imbalance in my sample mirrors that of the online ace community, which skews female and nonbinary over male, perhaps due to a greater conflict between asexuality and social norms for males (Gupta 2018). Participants hailed from a wide variety of geographic regions, encompassing urban and rural areas in North America, Europe, and Asia. Six participants had been involved with the subreddit for over a year, while the other 6 had just joined within the past year. Table 1 displays demographic attributes and variables of interest for all participants.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Eligible individuals participated in qualitative, semi-structured interviews via a voice or video chat platform of their choice (Discord voice call, Zoom, WhatsApp call, etc.). The interview protocol encouraged participants to reflect on their identity development and their experiences with the r/asexuality community. Interviews lasted between 50-60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using the University of Chicago's Amazon Web

Services (AWS) Transcription service. Participants' identifying information was kept confidential throughout all stages of the process.

I manually coded the transcripts by first noting over one hundred themes that emerged in the interviews (for instance, “answering questions” and “feels like the ‘only one’”). I then combined similar themes to consolidate them into about thirty codes (e.g., “role” and “valid”). From there, I created a data matrix to link the codes to quotations from each interviewee (Lareau 2021). I used the data matrix to draw out patterns and focus on codes that were the most prominent across interviewees. It was through this analysis that I began to focus with particular attention on how participants explained their roles in r/asexuality and their narratives of identity development.

I categorized someone as new to r/asexuality if they had started to interact with the subreddit within the past year, and someone as more experienced if they had participated in the community for over a year. I assigned each interviewee a primary role by asking each interviewee directly what they consider their role to be and evaluating instances in which someone alluded to the capacity in which they engage with r/asexuality (e.g., describing things they have posted). I classified participants whose engagement centered around seeking information and observing content on the subreddit as “lurkers” and those who primarily participated by offering information and emotional support and building community as “supporters.” While some participants engaged with r/asexuality in both capacities, their narratives pointed clearly to a primary affiliation as either a lurker or a supporter.

Researcher Positionality

Although I have identified as asexual for seven years, I had minimal experiences with the online ace community prior to beginning this project. Throughout my interactions with participants, I outwardly presented my identity as a member of the asexual community. By positioning myself in this way, I hoped to more easily recruit and gain rapport with interviewees. I wanted participants to feel like they were being treated as valuable informants rather than stigmatized subjects, especially since the asexual community has historically been pathologized (Stremel 2022; Mollet 2018). For these reasons, disclosing my own identity as an ace person was important to me. I also recognized that there were some disadvantages that could have come with my insider position, namely, that participants may assume shared knowledge rather than fully elaborate their taken-for-granted assumptions as they might to a perceived outsider. To mitigate these potential disadvantages of an “insider” position, I also explicitly positioned myself as an “outsider” to r/asexuality and Reddit in general. I asserted this “outsider” position by emphasizing that I was new to r/asexuality and asking clarifying questions when necessary. Thus, I attempted to balance the advantages and disadvantages that come with an insider identity by positioning myself as an “offline asexual.”

FINDINGS

Overall, I found that participants who were new to r/asexuality tended to take on a lurker role, while those who had spent more time in the subreddit assumed supportive roles in the community. These findings are represented graphically in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

As people who had just joined r/asexuality within the past year, Joyce, Jaden, Stephanie, and Josh primarily participated in the community by lurking². Through observing the posts and comments of other users, they each sought to clarify their identities by learning more about asexuality. Specifically, lurking helped newer members of r/asexuality learn about differentiated attraction and come to see asexuality as a diverse spectrum, both of which were key concepts for them to make sense of their identities.

Whereas newer members interacted with r/asexuality by lurking and learning, more established members of the subreddit viewed their role as one of affirmation and support. Pat, Nicholas, Ashley, Hailey, and Brianna, who had each been involved with r/asexuality for over a year, focused their participation in the community on offering support and building community. While established members of the subreddit were comfortable with their asexual identities, they were drawn to engaging with r/asexuality in order to feel less alone in their experiences. In doing so, they ultimately reaffirmed their own identities by supporting a community within which their identities are recognized and validated.

I begin by introducing the lurkers, demonstrating how they learn through observing posts and asking for information and support. I show how lurkers negotiate their identities as they learn about differentiated attraction and come to see asexuality as a spectrum. I suggest a pathway from lurker to supporter as new members of r/asexuality become more confident in their identities. I conclude by investigating a discrepant case to consider how lurking may also benefit established members of the subreddit. Next, I turn to the supporters. I explain how they achieve recognition of their own identities by supporting others and building community. I show that as

² All participant names are pseudonyms.

supporters engage with r/asexuality, they continue to learn in ways that increase their understanding of themselves and other ace people. Finally, I discuss the cases of two supporters who are new to r/asexuality, suggesting that their participation in other online queer communities equipped these individuals to take on supportive roles in the subreddit.

Learning Through Lurking

As relatively new members of r/asexuality, Joyce, Jaden, Stephanie, and Josh primarily saw their role in the community as lurkers. These individuals had first come across r/asexuality within the past year. When asked how she interacts with r/asexuality, Joyce said:

I'm more of like a lurker. I just stay here and see if there's any interesting stuff to look at. So I wouldn't say that I'm super in ... the Reddit asexual community because I don't really engage with it that much. I'm just here on occasion.

In addition to searching for “interesting” content, lurkers also participated in r/asexuality by asking questions. For instance, Joyce turned to r/asexuality for support in navigating interactions with a potential intimate partner:

I don't know what I'm feeling for him. So that's why I had to ask other people for help, but also because I'm living in Singapore, the LGBT community here is so restricted, so I don't really have any community here to ask. So, that's why I went online for help.

Through lurking and seeking support, new members of r/asexuality learned about their identities. Like Joyce, Jaden explained how lurking helped him make sense of his feelings:

I'm mostly lurking and upvoting. I like seeing what others think ... And I've written once like asking for advice ... it was pretty much in the beginning. I wasn't really sure what I was feeling and what category or why, so I just posted a bit like just getting it out of myself to be able to think better because it was just stuck

in my mind. And then I wrote about it and it felt better. But mostly I'm just lurking. And upvoting and just seeing what others think and feel. And figuring out how I feel in the process.

Thus, by lurking, Jaden was able to understand their feelings, using “what others think” to form their own identity. Stephanie also explained her participation in r/asexuality as observing others: “I do, you know, at least look through my feed once a couple times a week just to see like if there's anything there that resonates with me or that I can take something from.” Like Joyce and Jaden, Stephanie engaged with r/asexuality to find content that “resonated,” which she could use to make sense of her own identity.

Newcomers to r/asexuality did not necessarily participate as lurkers in other Reddit communities. For instance, Josh explained that he is more likely to post or comment on topics that he feels knowledgeable about:

I think overall I'm a lurker on everything, but like if it's something that's something that I'm more experienced with or expertise, then yeah, I'll do more posting or commenting but since I don't really feel like I'm too good at or know too much about this topic [asexuality]...that's why I don't, I also think that's why I don't really post because I feel like a newbie.

Having only joined r/asexuality within the past year, Josh did not feel experienced enough to post in the subreddit. Therefore, Josh directly tied his lurking role to his “newbie” status in the community.

Differentiated attraction.

A key idea that lurkers learned about on r/asexuality which they used to elaborate their asexual identities is the concept of differentiated attraction. In asexual and aromantic communities, it is common practice to discuss different forms of attraction, such as sexual,

romantic, platonic, aesthetic, and more³. Importantly, different types of attraction can work in tandem or separately. For instance, one could find a celebrity aesthetically attractive (“good-looking,” “pretty,” “handsome,” etc.) but not be sexually attracted to that person. Or, one could be romantically attracted to a person they have a crush on and desire a romantic relationship but not be sexually attracted to that person and not desire a sexual relationship. Allonormative society sees romantic and sexual attraction as inextricably intertwined and prioritizes sexual-romantic attraction and sexual-romantic relationships above other forms of attraction and relationships. Asexual and aromantic communities, by definition, are excluded from this model, so they have developed practices of differentiating attraction as an alternative way of categorizing desires and relationships.

Lurkers explained how they felt confused prior to learning to differentiate forms of attraction. For some, this confusion led to compounding difficulties in seeking intimate relationships. Josh explained his experiences in the dating scene before coming to identify as asexual:

I guess in my twenties I thought I needed to be physically attracted to them, but that's sort of obvious, I guess I never felt anything like physical attraction...I think I just have a very small subset of romantic attraction, but romantically attracted to very few people. Yeah, it's confusing, since you're not really taught at a young age to separate sexual attraction, romantic attraction...

Not only did Josh’s lack of sexual attraction present difficulties in navigating potential intimate relationships, but also his lack of a framework to distinguish between sexual and romantic

³ Differentiated attraction is commonly referred to as the split-attraction model within academic writing and online asexual communities. Ace bloggers have critiqued the term “split-attraction model” for its lack of theoretical precision (Sennkestra 2020; Coyote 2021), and the term’s roots in aphobic critiques of asexuality (Coyote 2020). Following Coyote and Sennkestra, I use “differentiated attraction” to refer to how aromantic and asexual communities differentiate between various forms of attraction (sexual, romantic, platonic, aesthetic, etc.).

attraction left him confused about his own desires—he could not reconcile his desire to date with his lack of sexual attraction.

Learning about differentiated attraction by lurking on r/asexuality was critical for newcomers to realize their asexual identities. For instance, Stephanie used the framework of differentiated attraction to make sense of how she could be both attracted to her husband and ace:

I was like, ‘oh wow, there's all these different forms of attraction, like you don't really label them’ . . . and I think I always confused all these different types of attraction for sexual attraction. I just thought like, ‘well yeah, I'm emotionally attracted to my husband. I'm intellectually and aesthetically attracted to my husband, so all of that, you know, is sexual attraction,’ I guess, so just knowing that it's its own thing and not everybody feels it, you know, but you do feel attracted to people, just not in that sense, and I don't know, I still think I'm trying to fully understand that.

Without learning to differentiate emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic attraction from sexual attraction, Stephanie would not have been able to reconcile being asexual with her feelings of attraction for her husband. Similarly, Jaden said:

I've always thought like if I think someone is hot, obviously that must be just attraction. I didn't know that there were different types of attraction more than romantic and sexual...But then when I started reading about it, I noticed that sexual attraction wasn't actually at all what I was feeling because it described it pretty well, and it felt very foreign to me. And then it also talked about, yeah, a lot of people can still find people attractive, like in their features, and it's called aesthetic attraction. So you can recognize that someone looks good but it's not sexual attraction, that's aesthetic attraction, same way, you can think a room looks nice, you can think a person looks nice. And that kind of put words into what I felt.

Learning to distinguish between aesthetic and sexual attraction was crucial for Jaden to come to see himself as asexual.

Not only did learning about differentiated attraction enable ace-questioning lurkers to identify as asexual in the first place, but it also was a source of (re)affirmation for lurkers, who used the concept to navigate doubts about their identities. For instance, Joyce said:

So at first, I thought that sexual attraction was like ... that's just sexual attraction, like that was all I knew. But once I got into the community and learned about all the different forms of attraction that you can have, I realized it actually helped me validate myself a lot more, because I don't have to be constantly worried that like, "oh, I'm feeling some sort of attraction, so I must not be ace anymore then," so, I guess that's why I love the community there, because it's so helpful and it's not really something that's easily found when you like Google it or something, and it's so much more helpful when there's someone there from the community explaining it to you.

For Joyce, an understanding of different forms of attraction provides a bulwark against potential threats to her ace identity. With an understanding of aesthetic attraction as something distinct from romantic or sexual attraction, for example, Joyce can continue identifying as asexual even if she meets someone who she sees as good-looking. Thus, through lurking, newcomers to r/asexuality developed a conceptual understanding of differentiated attraction that supported them in identifying as asexual and navigating doubts.

Asexuality as a spectrum.

In addition to learning to differentiate types of attraction, coming to an understanding of asexuality as a spectrum was another way that newcomers developed their identities through lurking in r/asexuality. While all asexual people experience little to no sexual attraction, some ace people experience more sexual attraction than others. Graysexual (or gray asexual) is one term that encapsulates how, for some people, their (a)sexuality is not black or white but

somewhere in between. For Stephanie, learning that asexuality is a spectrum helped her “refine” her identity:

I think as I learned more, my definition is refined. I think the biggest thing was when you first look it up and then the thing that stands out the most is like you don't feel sexual attraction, but then I'm like, “yeah, but I mean I do a little bit,” and then you're like, “well what does that mean?” Like, “am I actually asexual?” And then you read about gray ace, and then you read about different types of attraction and so it's like you get the broad umbrella term, but then as you read more and you talk to people or you look through social media or Reddit or whatever, that's when you really start to kind of narrow down what the definition is and how it applies to you.

Since Stephanie felt sexual attraction “a little bit,” she doubted whether she could be “actually asexual.” Thus, lurking helped Stephanie come to understand asexuality as a spectrum, allowing her to make sense of how asexuality applies to her own experiences.

Through lurking, new members of r/asexuality also learned that attitudes about sex in the ace community vary. Asexual communities conceptualize these variations as a spectrum from sex favorable to sex repulsed. Some ace people might enjoy sex for the physical sensations and intimacy it can provide (regardless of whether sexual attraction is present), while others are disgusted by the idea of sex, and still others are indifferent. Learning about these differences was helpful for Jaden to understand asexuality, and by extension, his own identity:

Some things in the ace community I've been really able to relate to and some not at all. And then that's the thing like I've been able to read some books with it [sex], like fanfic and then I was like, “oh no, I can't be ace because I like reading about it.” But then when I started reading about microlabels ... I was like, “ooh.” I think it really helps because sometimes you don't fit in the asexual box that's kind of presented. Because it is a spectrum, and then the microlabels, I think, help you find your place on the spectrum.

In Jaden’s case, learning about “microlabels” (labels that fall under or overlap with the asexual umbrella) helped him navigate doubts and reaffirm his ace-ness despite not fitting perfectly into the “asexual box.”

The asexual community is also diverse when it comes to romantic orientations. According to the 2022 Ace Community Survey, 48.4% of asexual people consider themselves to be on the aromantic spectrum, 30.2% do not identify as aromantic, and 21.4% are unsure about their romantic orientation (Ace Community Survey Team 2024). In addition to diverse experiences of romantic attraction (or lack thereof), ace people have differing attitudes about whether they desire a relationship in practice⁴. For Joyce, the ace community’s acceptance of diverse romantic orientations was important as she navigated her (a)romantic desires:

It was during the time where my friend confessed to me and at first I wanted to try it out because why not? ... But I realized that like, I didn't wanna do it. So, I kind of had to go to these spaces to like, “Can someone tell me that it's OK to say no but it's also OK to try?” ... Being aroace is not like a confirmed no that you don't want to date people and stuff and that's why I like this community so much ‘cuz there isn't really a strict answer for what you can do. It really depends on the person and yet, even if you do date and stuff, you are still accepted in the community and that's why I like it so much.

By observing diverse orientations and attitudes towards romantic relationships in r/asexuality, Joyce could confidently identify as ace, whether she wanted to form romantic relationships or not. Thus, through lurking, newcomers to r/asexuality learned about the diversity of the asexual community which in turn helped them negotiate their own identities.

⁴ Experiencing romantic attraction and desiring to actually be in a relationship, while connected, are not inseparable. For instance, many alloromantic people have crushes on celebrities but would not wish to have a romantic relationship with that celebrity in reality. On the flipside, it is possible for aromantic people to desire a romantic relationship in lieu of feelings of romantic attraction, to meet financial or care needs, for example.

Aspiring supporters.

While newer members of r/asexuality tended to learn through lurking, they aspired to take on new roles in the community as they became more confident in their identities. These pathways from lurking to supporting roles sustain r/asexuality as the subreddit continues to grow over time. Stephanie's narrative illustrates her aspired trajectory from "baby queer" to advocate:

My therapist introduced me to the term "baby queer" ... and so it's like I'm just taking these little steps to kind of identify myself and it's really scary for me ... that feeling of uncertainty and just awkwardness that comes with identifying with your...new sexual identity and I feel like once I'm a little more confident in that, and that I feel like I actually have a solid strong confident voice, I feel like I will interact more ... I wanna be an advocate. I want to help people feel safe and that's my goal eventually, but right now it's like I need to get a grasp on myself before I feel like I can really do good.

With this outlook, it is likely that Stephanie's primary role will transition from lurker to supporter as she continues to spend more time in r/asexuality. Like Stephanie, Jaden hoped to grow from learner/lurker to supporter:

I find a hard time to actually comment a lot of times because I'm still pretty new to this. So I like to see what others say first and maybe sometimes I can find the confidence to like, "oh yeah, this is how I feel too," just to try and validate others.

Jaden implies that supporting others will come easier once they develop more confidence in their identity.

How do members of r/asexuality transition from lurkers to supporters? While answering this question conclusively would require a longitudinal study, Joyce's story illuminates a potential mechanism:

Someone was going through the same situation like me and the guy I'm talking to, so, I kind of gave the advice of the person that wrote the long message to me and kind of rephrased it for them. Yeah, I think it was so sweet because I don't think I'll ever forget that person that really helped me.

As newcomers to r/asexuality recycle advice that is useful for them, they build their confidence as support figures. At the same time, they shape ace discourse by propagating knowledge and advice that reflects their own experiences. Eventually, these individuals may come to see their primary role in the community as supporting others rather than learning through lurking.

Established lurkers.

Not everyone who participates in r/asexuality in a lurking capacity is new to the subreddit. Although most lurkers were new to r/asexuality, Lena's case is an instructive exception. Lena described herself as a lurker⁵ even though she had spent over three years in the community. She explained her participation in r/asexuality as passively looking at posts:

I wouldn't really say that I have a role in the community...To be honest, I don't even know myself why I am looking at these posts. It's just, I don't know, nice to feel that you're not alone with these feelings...I'm just looking for stuff.

Clearly, Lena's primary role is as a lurker. Internet users differ in their approaches to online communities, so Lena's long-term lurking in r/asexuality is not unusual. Her approach to the subreddit may be relatively common among established members of r/asexuality, since more engaged members may have been more likely to participate in the study. Although long-term

⁵ Many of those whose primary role was supporting others also characterized themselves as lurkers. However, their lurking was in service of their desire to help others—they would seek out posts where their advice and support would be valuable. Lena, on the other hand, did not focus her participation in r/asexuality on supporting others.

members of r/asexuality are more likely to take supportive roles, this does not mean that all of them will necessarily do so.

For Lena, her participation may be influenced by various personal characteristics. Lena is relatively young for being an established member of r/asexuality, as she is 21 years old. Perhaps being at a formative period in her life makes Lena less inclined to take on a supportive role in the subreddit. Alternatively, Lena's attitudes about the internet could influence the role she assumes in the community. Lena, self-described as "shy," posts less now because she has adopted a more cautious approach to sharing things over the internet. Whatever it may be that leads Lena to continue lurking, her participation as a lurker nonetheless facilitates her identity negotiation.

Through lurking, Lena reaffirms her identity by engaging with a space in which she is "not alone." Lena explained how finding a relatable post on the subreddit reassured her that she is not a "weirdo":

Recently I saw some post of some person . . . [saying] that they don't like showing exposed skin or wearing much revealing clothing ... I really was interested by that because I kind of feel similarly ... and I thought that this would be weird, but I was kinda happy that someone else also thinks that. . . It let me feel less like a weirdo.

Even though she has been a member of r/asexuality for three years, Lena continues to find reassurance in posts that she relates to. The recognition Lena can attain in r/asexuality is especially crucial given the fact that she has had only a fleeting encounter with another ace person in real life and has only come out to one person. By providing connection to an asexual community, the subreddit plays a vital role in Lena's identity negotiation, just as it does for less established lurkers.

While lurking is more common among new members of r/asexuality, some established members negotiate their identities through continued lurking. Future studies should examine long-term lurkers like Lena to better understand how lurking may serve different functions for established members of r/asexuality than those who are new to the community. Considering lurking as a means of connecting to the asexual community promises to be an especially fruitful endeavor.

Supporting Others and Building Community

Unlike the newer members of r/asexuality, Pat, Nicholas, Ashley, Hailey, and Brianna described their primary role in the community as supporters. Each of these supporters had been members of r/asexuality for a year and a half to four years. Here, I use supporters to signify two functions: (1) support as offering affirmation and guidance, and (2) support as shoring up the community, just as a foundation supports a building. Pat described their primary role in the subreddit as a support figure for other ace people:

I kind of consider myself a cheerleader for other people. Like I want to be the person I didn't have growing up...Even if I can sit there and say, "I hear you, you're valid, how can I support you?" That has value to me.

Similarly, Nicholas categorized his interactions with the subreddit as helping others:

Just reading and responding or replying. Mostly helping, answering some questions about some confusion about if some feeling is considered asexual or not. Or just comforting people about certain stuff, like mostly there are people who rant about certain experiences and stuff, and I relate to that and share my experiences.

Like Pat, Nicholas primarily interacted with r/asexuality by providing informational and affective support. Often, these forms of support are deeply intertwined. For instance, Hailey explained her role by narrating a time she provided support to a questioning individual:

Usually I just answer questions like if someone asks, “Is this asexuality?” then I’ll answer that...One person thought they were a sociopath because they just didn’t like kissing and I told them, “Okay, that’s not sociopathy. You might just be germophobic, you might be aromantic, but you’re fine.”

Hailey’s comment not only provided factual information to assuage the individual’s doubts (about reasons why one might not enjoy kissing that are not sociopathy) but also offered comfort (“you’re fine”).

Of course, lurking and supporting others are not mutually exclusive. But while lurkers observe posts to learn more about asexuality, supporters lurk in order to find posts where their knowledge or support is needed. In this vein, Ashley explained her engagement as “Pretty much looking in the background whenever somebody needs somebody, I’m there.” Rather than seeking advice, supporters engage with r/asexuality with the intent to give advice to those who need it. Ultimately, supporters strengthened their identities through continuous interactions with others who share their experiences. By affirming others, supporters were able to take part in and construct the community they needed.

“Not alone”: Supporting others as achieving recognition.

Supporting others helped established members of r/asexuality ameliorate the profound loneliness they experienced living in an allonormative society. As they took on supportive roles in the community, their identities were recognized by other members of the subreddit. Nicholas explained how isolated he felt as an asexual person living in a rural region of his European country:

You don’t see it in real life...I know nobody. I don’t know anybody who is asexual, near my city or my district or wherever. I really don’t know and it feels, you know, weird being in this sort of minority, so, I think it’s only natural to feel like a fraud when you’re the *only one* who feels this way. I think it is most

likely caused by when you want to share that information that you're ace to other people then they sometimes convince you that you're not. And I don't mean to convince you like directly, but also indirectly...A lot of allosexuals, you know, talk about sex basically all the time.

Physically isolated from other asexual people, Nicholas turned to r/asexuality to interact with others who shared his experiences. Nicholas's loneliness was so extreme that he felt like a fraud, surrounded by allonormativity and being the "only one" to not fit with those norms. By continuing to participate in r/asexuality even after coming to adopt an asexual identity, Nicholas could continually reaffirm that his identity is real. At least in the subreddit, he was not "the only one." His experiences were recognized by others.

Like Nicholas, Ashley did not know any other ace people in real life. She explained that although her community was generally supportive of LGBTQ+ people, they were not familiar with asexuality:

For me, in my cultural community, it [asexuality] is sort of not as well-known as the rest of the LGBTQ community. So a lot of them, especially in the older generation sort of like, "no, you just haven't met the right person yet," and it's sort of like, "No, grandma, that's not gonna work. That's not how it works." And trying to change the boomer minds about it, sometimes it's a meaningless task. It's not going to help. You're gonna keep talking to a wall, and it's not gonna make a change.

Although Ashley did not experience blatant aphobia from her community, she did face misrecognition from others. Telling an ace person that they "just haven't met the right person yet" denies that asexuality is real—it would be equivalent to telling a gay man that he "just hasn't found the right woman yet." These allonormative statements, when compounded over time and across contexts, threaten ace people's identities. To overcome this threat, Ashley turned to r/asexuality to discuss her identity without feeling like she was "talking to a wall."

Knowing that their identities would not be recognized by people in their physical communities, some ace people felt coerced into misrepresenting themselves outside of r/asexuality. For instance, Hailey explained that she could “blend in” as long as she did not disclose her ace identity:

I live in a conservative area...It's not really that bad because asexuality, it's not like, you know, other sexualities where you can come with some controversial partner and be in trouble. And for the most part, purity culture is kind of emphasized here, so it's just like kind of blend in ...Given the politics of the general area I tend to not speak of asexuality in terms of such, I usually say "I'm just not interested", "I don't see anyone like that." For distant family though I don't even say that.

In her daily life, Hailey was seen by others as allosexual, a perception that was not significantly challenged when Hailey would say that she is “just not interested.” While Hailey could use contextual statements to excuse her asexual behavior, she was unable to communicate her asexual identity. Hailey could present herself fully as ace only in the context of r/asexuality.

For Brianna, her identity as an ace Black woman contributed to feelings of isolation. She described how the sexualization she experienced as a Black girl caused her to doubt her ace identity:

Being a Black girl, it's a lot of pressure to conform to that standard of you gotta be this. You gotta do that. You have to be what these men want you to be or be what all the girls want you to be, so, it was just me thinking maybe I'm a late bloomer, maybe my feelings will change, maybe I'm kind of lying to myself or maybe I am just not normal at all. So of course it was just very contradictory.

Brianna doubted the validity of her asexual identity due to the misrecognition she faced as a Black woman who is ace. Brianna found crucial recognition in r/asexuality: “I’m not alone and there are people who are like me.”

On the other side of the spectrum, Pat grew up immersed in “a really strong queer community.” However, Pat also felt alone in their experiences of (a)sexuality:

I wasn't judged, but I was the only one. Right, and so I spent a lot of time very, not isolated, but lonely even around my peers. Because we weren't having the same experiences, even though we weren't judging each other for any of our experiences. My experiences were completely different... While I wasn't judged and while I was very safe and secure, I was really the *only one*.

Although Pat was supported by the community around them, they too saw themselves as “the only one.” In the subreddit, Pat could interact with people who had “the same experiences,” or at least similar ones. Thus, supporters turned to r/asexuality not only to evade misrecognition but also to be recognized by other ace people. As they helped others navigate their identities, supporters shored up their own identities against the misrecognition they faced in an allonormative society.

Building community.

Through their efforts to support other ace people, established members of r/asexuality reinforced the very community which was an important source of camaraderie and reaffirmation for them. Thus, as they supported others, Pat, Nicholas, Ashley, Hailey, and Brianna were simultaneously building the foundation upon which their own identities stood. Pat described how it feels to support people in r/asexuality:

I always hope to be the person I didn't have growing up...Typically it makes me feel like I'm building a stronger community for all of us...There's real support out there, even if it is just internet support, it's real support. You're not sitting there staring at a screen going, “oh, no one thinks like I do.” You're seeing someone say, “no, you're not alone in this.”

As Pat engaged with r/asexuality as a supporter, they fulfilled their desire to pay it forward, giving the sort of support they would have liked to receive when they were trying to figure out their own identity. In doing so, Pat was building a community that gave their own identity meaning by creating a social context within which others think like they do and they are not alone in their experiences. Furthermore, Pat explained how they have become more comfortable in their identity:

There's been confidence that has come in my identity... I'm definitely more comfortable saying I'm ace... I guess the confidence comes from knowing I have nonjudgmental spaces.

The community that Pat is building provides the nonjudgmental space that in turn supports Pat (and other ace people) in feeling more confident in their identities.

Building a community unfolds over time. In this vein, Nicholas described the development of asexual communities from a historical lens:

I would like to think about the way how basically, the LGBTQ was created in the first place... Like a river, it went from a simple spring and then it flowed and it just, explode into something more than just being straight or gay. Then we've learned that there are transsexual people, that there are bisexual, that we have queer people and it was created because people started to learn more about themselves and they realized that it's not just like one thing or the other, but there are a multitude, a sort of, a spectrum.

By helping others “learn more about themselves,” Nicholas contributes to the branching of his metaphorical river. His supportive role in r/asexuality builds a community that widens the distributary that ace people can flow into.

Supporters found that helping newcomers was immensely fulfilling. For example, as Ashley explained her role in r/asexuality, she said:

For the young asexuals, the fledglings who are just getting into the subreddit I feel it's a big scary, daunting place there, which can be overwhelming for some people, especially when they're questioning whether they're ace or not. So helping them figure it out actually helps bring me joy and sort of the self-confirmation of I'm doing the right thing.

Ashley did not want “fledglings” to feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the subreddit, so she valued creating a safe space for them. In the process, she reaffirmed that she was “doing the right thing.” Ultimately, by supporting others, established members of r/asexuality built a community wherein they could attain recognition and reaffirmation.

Unlike the other supporters, Brianna was more inclined to engage with r/asexuality by partaking in discussions and sharing her poetry than by offering support through affirmation and guidance. But just like the rest of the supporters, Brianna expressed a desire to “help build a community.” Of course, ace people do not only participate in online asexual communities to seek out or give advice—a large and important function of these spaces is to partake in and create ace culture. Thus, making and sharing memes, discussing the merits of different flag designs, and talking about ace representation in media are all ways in which asexual people build community.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 here]

Figure 1 is an example of a meme found in r/asexuality. The meme references an inside joke among the online ace community—that garlic bread is better than sex. Presumably, since asexual people spend less time thinking about sex, they think about garlic bread instead. Figure 2 shows a post from r/asexuality in which the user expresses pride in acquiring an ace flag from a friend. Thus, although support is a central part of r/asexuality—both seeking and sharing—the subreddit’s function as a site for camaraderie and culture should not be discounted. As Brianna said: “It’s very fun when everyone comes together.”

Continued learning.

While established members of r/asexuality primarily engaged with the community by supporting others, they continued to learn through their participation in the subreddit. Mirroring the experiences of lurkers, supporters found that they benefited from encountering diversity within the ace community as they engaged in r/asexuality. These experiences helped supporters better understand other ace people. Pat described their experiences learning about microlabels:

Before I got on the subreddit...I think all of the microlabels would have made me really uncomfortable. Not because I judge other people necessarily, but because I think I would have felt like, well, “do I need them? Like, do I need to break it down that much?” ... Being on the subreddit has really helped me go, “oh no, I can just be over here doing this, and they can be over there, yeah.” And some of them are very specific. I just go, “oh, that's a new word.” (laughs) We can always learn.

Being open to learning about varied identities under the ace umbrella helped Pat gain confidence in how they relate to other asexual people. In addition, continuing to learn about diversity within the ace community helped some supporters better understand their own identities. For instance, Nicholas explained:

Just recently, because I've heard this, but never understood its meaning and it was the aegosexual...So what that is, is that I don't experience sexual attraction in real life, but the idea of sex is, you know, great, and when I imagine stuff that I know I wanted it and I feel that sexual attraction, which was the most confusing thing about this. But ... when I see a person immediately it's gone. Like I don't even think about it...I related to that a lot because that's what created that confusion...When I read that...I understood that that might be it.

Prior to learning about aegosexuality, Nicholas was confused by his desire for sex in theory and his lack of sexual attraction, which he perceived to conflict with each other. Once he came to understand aegosexuality, Nicholas could reconcile these experiences and make his identity

coherent. Brianna explained that she continued to refine her own identity even after three years in r/asexuality, saying, “I like sitting and I like learning and I like observing from other people. And it also helps me better understand myself.” Thus, although established members of r/asexuality saw their primary role as supporting others and building community, they continued to learn through their participation in the subreddit in ways that facilitated their identity negotiation.

Novice supporters?

While most supporters were experienced members of r/asexuality, there were some exceptions to this general pattern. Livia and Melissa, each of whom had only joined the subreddit within the past six months, both took on supportive roles in the community. Livia explained:

I prefer to provide support...If someone posts something that I feel like they need to hear that they're not alone and stuff like that, especially, I will post. Either that or if there is something informative, like if they're asking a “theoretical” question.

Melissa also participated in r/asexuality by providing support: “I check for new posts, and if it's something that I can relate to, I offer my contribution like a comment to it, to let them know that they're not alone.” In particular, Melissa often offers encouragement to people who post about their experiences with dating. She feels (uniquely) qualified to provide relationship advice due to multiple experiences meeting potential ace partners online.

Although they were relatively new to r/asexuality, Livia and Melissa were not new to identifying as ace. In fact, they had each identified as asexual for many years. Livia and Melissa were the only participants who joined r/asexuality within the past year while having identified as ace for much longer. They each became involved with the subreddit for different reasons. Livia joined after starting hormone replacement therapy and becoming more outgoing as a result.

Melissa joined after a Google search for an ace dating subreddit. Both were already knowledgeable about asexuality—Livia had a detailed understanding of differentiated attraction that she learned from engagement with online trans communities, while Melissa had been an active member of AVEN for over a decade. Livia and Melissa were new to the place (r/asexuality), but they were not new to the space (the online queer community). Because of their familiarity with the space prior to joining r/asexuality, neither Livia nor Melissa was a novice when it came to knowledge about asexuality. Thus, it makes sense that they took on supportive roles in the subreddit.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that r/asexuality is an important site for identity work, not only for newcomers but also for established members of the community. While new members learn through lurking, more experienced members shore up their identities by supporting the community. Thus, asexual online spaces are not merely sites of one-way exchange whereby experienced role models impart knowledge to newcomers. Rather, they are discursive hubs within which asexuality is continuously (re)produced through interactions between older and newer members alike.

At the same time, this study builds on previous scholarship on the identity negotiation processes of ace people. First, these findings show that initial identification as asexual develops from a nuanced understanding of asexuality in addition to “discovery” of the term. In particular, gaining a conceptual understanding of differentiated attraction and coming to understand asexuality as a diverse spectrum are important developments that facilitate identification with

asexuality. These findings flesh out the “exploration and education” and “identity acceptance” stages of asexual identity formation with rich qualitative data (Robbins et al. 2015). Thus, a contribution of this study is that it illustrates in more detail the processes whereby people come to identify as asexual.

Moreover, this study explores how people who already identify as ace negotiate their identities through doubts and feelings of isolation. Participants emphasized the importance of r/asexuality as a space in which they did not feel like “the only one.” These findings point to the continued significance of recognition for ace people, especially as they navigate allonormative society. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of asexual identity negotiation by demonstrating how important being in community with other ace people is to experiencing wholeness (Mollet 2018). More broadly, these findings contribute to the sociology of deviance by examining identity work beyond “becoming” asexual. Future sociological research should investigate how other communities negotiate their identities after initial identification with a deviant label.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Since this study focused on participants at one point in time, it cannot analyze in detail the identity formation pathways of these individuals over time. A longitudinal study of newcomers to r/asexuality could more fully examine the mechanisms by which individuals move from lurkers to supporters. Future studies could also focus on long-term lurkers to determine how continued lurking facilitates identity negotiation and/or serves other functions.

The findings presented here may have implications not only for the study of marginalized sexual communities but also for other social groups which are geographically dispersed and

made invisible by societal norms—such as trans people, people experiencing underdiagnosed mental health conditions, fringe political groups, and certain diasporic communities. Like ace people, these groups may turn to online spaces to learn from like-minded others or support each other. This project demonstrates how the asexual community uses Reddit to (re)produce knowledge and community as its newer and more experienced members interact with each other. The roles and their functions I formulate here may well apply to how members of other marginalized communities may interact with each other in the digital sphere.

Future studies should examine asexual online communities through a subcultural lens. Queer communities have long gathered in bars, house parties, and other features of nightlife. Asexual people rarely gather in physical venues like these (Winer et al. 2022). In lieu of these physical spaces, how do online communities like r/asexuality serve as sites for the creation and transmission of cultural products and meanings? I recommend studying asexual cultures not only via online forums like r/asexuality and AVEN but also through social media platforms that are popular among the ace community, such as Tumblr⁶. Finally, as scholars begin to address the gap in literature surrounding asexuality, we should continue to center ace voices through empirically sound qualitative research. Asexual people's unique positions in allonormative society lead to an epistemic privilege that supplies useful insights to the sociology of identity and community (Tessler and Winer 2023).

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Demographic Attributes and Variables of Interest Among Research Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Primary Role in r/asexuality	Time in r/asexuality
Stephanie	44	F	Hispanic	Lurker	1 month
Joyce	18	F	Asian	Lurker	1-2 months
Jaden	18	X	White	Lurker	3 months
Josh	31	M	Asian	Lurker	9-11 months
Lena	21	F	White	Lurker	4 years
Livia	36	F	White	Supporter	6 months
Melissa	38	F	White	Supporter	6 months
Hailey	20	F	White	Supporter	1.5 years
Ashley	32	F	American Indian	Supporter	2-3 years
Brianna	20	F	Black	Supporter	3 years
Pat	54	X	White	Supporter	3-4 years
Nicholas	25	M	White	Supporter	3-4 years

Table 2: Participants Arrayed by Time Spent in the Community and Primary Role

	Lurker	Supporter
Short	Stephanie Joyce Jaden Josh	Livia Melissa
Long	Lena	Hailey Ashley Pat Nicholas Brianna

Figure 1: “Garlic Bread” meme (r/asexuality 2025)

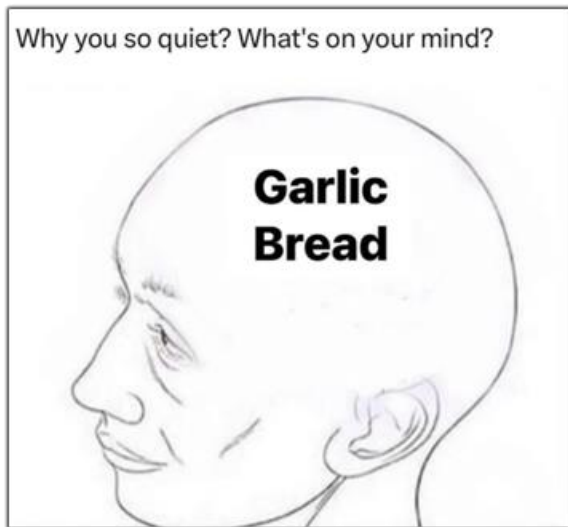


Figure 2: Ace Flag post (r/asexuality 2025)

MY FRIEND GOT ME A FLAG

Discussion

My friend got me an asexual flag!!!! I feel unbelievably happy and accepted right now. :3 Get a friend like this.

