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Identity and Perception Among Aspec Consumers of Mass Media

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IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION AMONG ASPEC CONSUMERS OF MASS MEDIA

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
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By

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION AMONG ASPEC CONSUMERS OF MASS MEDIA

The portrayals of sex and romance, as well as asexuality and aromanticism, in mass media can have a profound impact on the way asexual and aromantic media consumers view relationships and their own identities, and affect the perception and treatment of the aspec community as a whole. This study uses mixed qualitative methods of online discourse analysis and participant interviews to examine the how mass media has shaped the self-perception and life experiences relating to sex and romance among aspec audience members.

KEYWORDS: amatonormativity, aromantic, asexual, identity formation, mass media, queer theory

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Everything I know about sex and romance, I learned from the media.

At least, that was the case for a long time growing up. Sure, I did not need movies and television to know that romantic relationships existed – my parents, after all, were married, as were so many other adults that I encountered growing up. But beyond that, I was not privy to the workings of relationship-forming or of romantic feelings themselves among real people around me. That information was available to me only through fictional characters.

I grew up surrounded by stories that were all too eager to give me these new insights. From Disney animated films that would always reserve a few minutes for love songs, to kidcoms with episodes devoted to characters experiencing their first crush, first date, and first kiss. Characters giggling and blushing around handsome boys, ogling and drooling over beautiful girls. Courtships and proposals and weddings and honeymoons. I learned about the existence of sex from my mother's soap operas long before any teacher would dare touch upon it in school. TV taught me new terms like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend", and "more than friends" and "friends with benefits". Movies taught me what romantic gestures looked like, from brushing fingertips to racing through airports, from writing poems to building homes, all for a person's one true love.

These films and shows became a model for me to try it on my own. Starting in first grade, I would carefully select a classmate to be my "crush", based on how closely I thought their looks matched the sort that the characters I admired would fall in love with. I wrote secret-admirer letters and slipped them to random classmates, because I saw someone do it on my favorite TV show, and it looked exciting. I waited for someone to be my secret admirer in return (no one ever did). In middle school, when classmates started reading teen magazines and having celebrity crushes, I hurried to pick out an actor from

a movie franchise I liked to claim as my own, and print out a picture to tape to the inside of my locker door like people did in every teen movie I had ever seen.

And all the while, something was off. No matter how closely I tried to follow the example that had been set for me, it wasn't coming as naturally as it was supposed to. As the rest of my peers began pairing off into couples and hitting their big growing-up milestones, I was a mess of contradictory feelings: eagerly anticipating my magical first kiss while grimacing away in revulsion whenever characters locked lips on screen; wanting to be asked out on a date, to be seen as worthy of attraction, but being filled with dread the times that people actually did, turning down anyone who tried. When I finally tried it for real, said yes to a classmate who asked, the word "boyfriend" felt foreign and rang false in my mouth, holding hands and cuddling was just restricting and sweaty, and kissing was unnatural and forced. There was no "spark" that I had been anticipating, and when I ended the relationship over it, I didn't understand why he was so sad about it, instead of feeling relieved like me.

Something, I decided, was wrong. Specifically, something was wrong with *me*. Because if every person I ever saw on a screen could do this so easily, why couldn't I?

I spent years certain that this was the case before I had the fortune of stumbling across the term "asexual" online, and later "aromantic". And although these labels were a perfect fit, it took time for me to feel ready to claim them as my own. Doing so meant having to unlearn the messaging that I had been bombarded with all my life, telling me that all of the romantic moments that stories had sold me were a good and essential part of having worth and living a happy life. It meant that I had wasted so much time and so many tears over something I had never truly wanted.

When I selected this topic for my thesis paper, I did so with the knowledge of how great an effect romance and sex in the media had had on me throughout my formative

years, enough to leave me forever wondering what life could have been like for me if I had known all that time that there were other options in life.

Through the time I've spent reflecting on myself and engaging with others of the same identity, it's been made clear to me that my experience is far from unique. Online communities dedicated to aspec users are filled with posts and threads relaying personal stories just like my own: people who had the ideas of romantic and sexual attraction pushed upon them constantly throughout their formative years, not knowing there were any alternatives; people who had forced themselves into relationships and romantic or sexual situations in an effort to fit in; people who saw characters who didn't, or couldn't, engage in such attraction get painted as undesirable or even inhuman; people who wish that the media landscape as a whole would be more welcoming to stories like theirs. The ideas of love and how it works that are presented to media audiences shape so much of how relationships are viewed and approached, and its impact on the lives and perceptions of those who don't fit into the singular mold that media provides its viewers should not be ignored.

This paper aims to answer the question: how does mass media's portrayal aromanticism, asexuality, and love impact the identity formation self-perception of aspec media viewers? In order to attempt to determine that answer, I will explore personal testimony of aspec viewers' experiences with media, through posts shared online and through one-on-one interviews.

Overview of Terms

Before delving any further, it is important to establish definitions for terms that will be used throughout this paper. Asexuality is "a sexual orientation characterized by a persistent lack of sexual attraction toward any gender" (Asexuality Archive, 2012), while aromanticism refers to a lack of romantic attraction. Although there is significant overlap between the two, with 38.9% of asexuals identifying as aromantic according to the most

recent available census data (source 2), the two are not interchangeable; many asexual people are not aromantic, and many aromantic people are not asexual (Asexuality Archive, 2012). The term “ace” is used as a shorthand form of “asexual”, while “aromantic” is often shortened to “aro” (Weis et al., 2021). People who are both aromantic and asexual are referred to with the shorthand term “aroace” (Kliegman, 2021).

Asexuality and aromanticism are both spectra of identities. While many asexual and aromantic people respectively experience no sexual and romantic attraction at all, some who fall under these spectra experience very rare or limited attraction - as is the case with those who are gray-asexual or gray-aromantic (Asexuality Archive, 2012) - or may experience attraction only after a very strong emotional connection is formed with the potential object of attraction - as with those who are demisexual or demiromantic (Asexuality Archive, 2012). People who are asexual, gray-asexual, demisexual, or other identities within the asexual spectrum are termed “acespec” while those who are aromantic, gray-aromantic, demiromantic, or other identities within the aromantic spectrum are “arospec”; the term “aspec” refers to any identity that falls under either the asexual or the aromantic spectrum (Ask-An-Aro, 2019). “Alloromantic” refers to any person who does experience romantic attraction, and thus is not aromantic, while “allosexual” refers to any person who is not asexual (Cherry, 2022). Both terms, as well as the combination of both alloromantic and allosexual, can be shortened to “allo”.

Finally, in this paper, the word “queer” will be used as an umbrella term to refer to any and all identities that are not cisgender, heteroromantic, and heterosexual. I will be using this term instead of the more common LGBT initialism[1] in order to ensure that all relevant identities and labels are included without any being relegated to a plus-sign that

[1] And its variations, such as GLBT, LGBT+, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+, LGBTQQIP2SAA, etc. (Metzger, 2020)

may make them appear to be an afterthought, that the included identities do not display any ranking or prioritization based on their placement within the acronym, and that allies are clearly excluded from the label. The term “non-queer” will be used to refer to identities that do not fall under the above definition of queer - anyone who is cisgender, heteroromantic, and heterosexual.

Literature Review

Identity Formation

Defined broadly as “the complex manner in which human beings establish a unique view of self” (Herman, 2011), identity formation answers the broad question of *who* a person is. The answer encompasses not only individual factors such as personal values, interests, and sense of uniqueness, but the community and environment surrounding the individual, particularly the groups with which a person affiliates; this can consist of, for instance, being a certain race or ethnicity, a generation defined by birth year, a religious affiliation, or, as is the focus of this paper, a particular sexual orientation.

The process by which queer sexual orientation evolves from a process of inner questioning to a fundamental component of one’s identity has in the world of academia focused primarily on homosexuality, but the proposed models of the process are transferable to other non-heterosexual and non-heteroromantic identities under the queer umbrella. In a 1984 study of homosexual identity formation, V. C. Cass proposed a model in which this formation is a four-step process. The first stage involves a person realization of feeling different from other people in the surrounding heterosexual world, but still keeping the thoughts to themself and continuing to put up a front of heterosexuality. The second stage, a person feeling sure that are are gay and not wanting others to know, worrying about their reactions, but feeling a desire to meet

others like themself. The third stage, accepting their gay identity fairly happily and mixing socially with others who identify as homosexual, but are careful and selective about who they tell about their sexual orientation and still “try to adopt an attitude of getting on with [their] life like anyone else, and fitting in where [they] live and work” (Cass, 1984). In the fourth and final stage, the person feels proud of being gay, is prepared to disclose their orientation to many people, and is comfortable incorporating their sexual orientation into their personal identity.

In this model, having a community with which to mix socially and being able to view one’s sexuality as a positive thing - or, at the very least, as something that one should not be ashamed of - is critical to healthy identity formation in relation to sexual orientation. And while having the opportunity to find community and role models with a shared sexual identity in real life, for many, the most available community is found not in person, but through media, both traditional and new. Younger queer people especially seek out representation through traditional media such as television and film, and “rely on fictional media narratives as a primary source of information when forming [their] identity” (Meyer, 2009).

And these queer audience members are flocking to media in droves. Queer viewers have been found to be more likely than their non-queer counterparts to be television viewers, especially with streaming content (GLAAD et al., 2022). Queer audiences also play a large role in word-of-mouth advertising, as they are twice as likely to be heavy social media users (source GLAAD et al., 2022). As the size and visibility of queer viewers grew, so too did the amount and depth of media portrayals of queer characters and narratives, with such characters becoming increasingly mainstream, numerous, and more nuanced (MediaSmarts, n.d.). Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual viewers seek out and find solace in queer media presences whom they can look to as role models, and increased presence of such role models in the media is associated with

a positive effect on self-worth (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). The increased representation of the queer community has coincided with increased social acceptance of queer identities, with greater media consumption being associated with more positive attitudes toward those who experience same-sex attraction (Calzo & Ward, 2009). And among young and old members of the queer community, media continues to play a salient role in information seeking and identity formation, through both consumption and creation (Floegel & Costello, 2019).

Still, while undeniably queer representation in media has produced positive effects for the community, the queer media landscape is still far from perfect. Like so much of film and television, queer media struggles with intersectional diversity, with its representation being disproportionately white, young, neurotypical, and upper class (Goddard & Hogg, 2019). The proportions of queer to non-queer characters have yet to reflect their real-world proportions on television, and film lags much further behind in terms of representation (Varathan & McDonough, 2018). And perhaps most significantly, while the number of queer characters and plotlines has increased over the years, their narratives and the media landscape as a whole remains set in a narrow view of what, in terms of gender and sexuality, is considered ideal.

Heteronormativity

In popularizing the term in his 1993 book *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner provides the pithy definition of queer[2] theory to be "the project of elaborating, in ways that cannot be predicted in advance, this question: What do queers want?" Other sources state that queer theory "works to deconstruct or undo 'compulsory heterosexuality' and homosexual prohibition and calls for the

[2] The term "queer" as it is used in "queer theory" is distinct from "queer" as an umbrella term for sexual, romantic, and gender minorities. In the body of this paper, the latter definition applies to any use of the term unless otherwise specified.

implementation of an ‘opening up’” (Stewart, 2017); that queer theory emerged to identify a body of academia that is connected to, but not identical with, gay/lesbian studies, and instead distinguishes the term “queer” as one that “is politically radical, rejects binary categories, embraces more fluid categories, and tends to be ‘universalizing’ rather than ‘minoritizing’” (Raymond, 2003); or that queer theory can be defined as “a different way of understanding the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality; a focus on the performativity of gender and sexuality in the formation of identities; and a refusal of the easy conflation of sexual identity with the whole range of sexual desires, dispositions, and practices that constitute sexuality” (Valocchi, 2005).

Essentially, rather than the simpler definition of a theory as a constructed explanation for observations of the natural world (Angielczyk, 2017), queer theory instead functions as a viewpoint or set of principles that guide the observations. Under queer theory, social norms regarding sexuality, romance, gender, and relationships established within the structures of heteronormativity and amatonormativity are acknowledged as artificial constructs, and these social norms are not assumed to be universal and instead can be analyzed, criticized, and defied. Queer theory is thus essential for studying the aspec community, within which the expectations laid out by heteronormativity and amatonormativity, and the defiance thereof, play salient roles in aces’ and aros’ experiences, identities, and views.

Heteronormativity is defined as “a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality” (Robinson, 2016). The pervasiveness of this specific relationship type in mass media, juxtaposed with the relative infrequency of other relationships that deviate from this heteronormative formula (Feiring, 1999) and even the the fact that these other relationships so often have to go out of their way to argue the validity of the relationships

within the narrative itself, provide a model for viewers of what a normal and socially acceptable relationship is expected to entail.

The characterization of deviation away from heterosexuality and heteroromanticism informs how queer identities have historically been depicted in mass media - that is, as something abnormal or unnatural. Scholarly analysis of media text regarding the portrayals of queer and queer-coded characters illustrates a pattern of overwhelmingly negative treatment of queer identities. Characters who exhibit same-gender attraction frequently face death as a cosmic punishment for their indiscretion, a trope that was actively enforced in the Hays Code era of Hollywood but continued to pervade narratives even long after the mandates were lifted, and often referred to as 'Bury Your Gays' (Hulan, 2017). Others who do not explicitly exhibit same-gender attraction but who are coded as queer through mannerisms and appearances that reflect stereotypes of the queer community, especially homosexual men, are portrayed as villainous, predatory, or otherwise mentally disturbed (Kim, 2017). Although queer and queer-coded characters were present, the media still made it clear that heterosexual relationships were the only "acceptable" path, and queer viewers could only look to these straight narratives for social guidance as they developed their identities (Baugh, 2019).

Slowly, as the queer community fought for rights and visibility both within and outside of the world of media, more characters appeared on screen who were intended to be portrayed in a more positive light, but even today, the negative attitudes toward queer characters linger perhaps most glaringly in which queer characters and stories are most palatable to a non-queer audience - that is, the ones that deviate the least from the expected norm. Scenes that are deemed offensive to non-queer viewers are cut to keep programming "sponsor-friendly" (Barnhurst, 2007). Gay male characters are made more accessible to audiences by conforming to standards of traditional masculinity, while their

lesbian counterparts are made palatably feminine (Le Vay, 2019). And relationship expectations are the same as those for monogamous straight couples: courtship, betrothal, marriage, parenthood. These narratives give queer representation mainstream appeal, but also “comes at the expense of relative invisibility for other queer identities and lifestyles” (Kies, 2016). The result is a media landscape that is not only consistently heteronormative, but one that is also amatonormative.

Amatonormativity

The term amatonormativity was coined by Rice University’s Elizabeth Brake who, in her 2012 book *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law*, defined amatonormativity as “disproportionate focus on marital and amorous love relationships as special sites of value, and the assumption that romantic love is a universal goal”. Essentially, amatonormativity assumes three societal constants: that 1) every person desires a long-term, monogamous, romantic and sexual relationship; that 2) this relationship and the maintenance thereof must be prioritized above all other relationships; and 3) that entering and maintaining such a relationship is a necessary component of a healthy and prosperous life (Bonos, 2017).

In life outside of the media, the negative effects of amatonormativity can be clearly seen even among those who are alloromantic and allosexual. The prioritization of romantic relationships comes at the cost of “recognizing friendships, care networks, urban tribes, and other intimate associations” and “relegating them to cultural invisibility or second best” (Brake, 2012), often leaving few profound relationships outside the immediate family sufficiently maintained. The expectation of marriage carries a social a social stigma that, for single people and those in unconventional relationships, can lead to “being casually treated with suspicion, housing and child custody discrimination, alienation from family and community, and much more” (Gahran, 2017). The legal and financial ramifications are abundant - marriage can be a necessity for people to gain and

maintain benefits such as health insurance, social security, or citizenship (Persson, 2020). Social pressure from peers and negative connotations and stereotypes of singlehood (Simpson, 2016) lead to outright fear of singlehood. It is not uncommon for people to stay in unhappy or even abusive relationships (Jackson, 2001) because the alternative of singlehood is not viable or sustainable. And all of this has become so thoroughly established in society that few even perceive the existence of discrimination against single people - or, even considering discrimination against singles as a legitimate and justifiable form of prejudice (Morris et al., 2007).

With this prioritization of romantic and sexual relationships comes the deprioritization of platonic relationships, an issue that especially impacts single people when people within their personal network begin to grow increasingly distant as their time, attention, and social energy is devoted more and more to their romantic/sexual partner; research on people in romantic relationships confirms that “although they valued their friendships greatly, they felt they had to negotiate partial withdrawals from them once they embarked on a serious (heterosexual) romantic relationship” (Goedecke, 2018). As the romantic relationship takes increasing priority above all others, romantic partners are frequently expected to meet all of each others’ needs, applying a scarcity mentality wherein a person has a limited supply of love, and one must be possessive of and fight with others for a singular source (Spade, 2006).

These assumptions imposed on society are consistently reflected in the narratives within mass media. It is common for story plots or character development to involve the formation or confirmation of romantic and sexual relationships, to the point where such relationships in fiction are more an inevitability than a possibility; it is an inherent part of becoming a complete person and finding a happy ending (Baugh, 2019). The phrase “just friends” is consistently used in narratives and in real life to describe platonic relationships, while “more than friends” describes romantic ones - language that

places the relationships in a hierarchy with romance as the priority (Key, 2021). Media establishes the desire for romance and sex as a default, and platonic love is simply “not enough” (Mooknee, 2022). And the more that audiences are exposed to stories that consistently push these norms, the more they begin to accept them as reality and treat them as models for approaching their own personal relationships (Ward, 2003).

Methods

Research

My methodology for this study is a mixed methods approach involving two different data collection procedures (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) in order to incorporate both breadth and depth of qualitative data. First, a discourse analysis method in which I examined online discussion of asexuality and aromanticism by self-identified aces and aros, as related to mass media. Posts for analysis were collected from the social media sites Tumblr and Reddit, where hashtags and subreddits, respectively, enable community-building and formation of social support structures (Oakley, 2017; De Choudhury & De, 2014); public forums, particularly on AVEN[3]; individual blogs and personal essays, and their respective comments; and video essays and personal vlogs on Youtube, and discussions in their respective public comment sections. I found discussions, comments, and posts by searching keywords in the above sites that related to mass media and fictional portrayals of attraction. These keywords included: audience, character, fandom, fiction, film, headcanon, media, movie, plot, representation, series, ship, show, story, television, trope, TV, and video.

Second, I obtained more in-depth data by conducting personal interviews with members of the ace and aro communities about their experiences with media and how their orientation and media consumption habits inform each other. Interview participants

[3] The Asexual Visibility and Education Network - which is a long-established presence in the online asexual and aspec community (Doré, 2021), as well as the most populated online asexual network (AVEN, n.d.)

were recruited by advertising on Reddit, Tumblr, and AVEN, as well as through a non-public Discord server dedicated to aces and aros. The interviews were conducted in video format via Zoom. The interviews were semi-structured[4], as I knew what issues and topics I wanted to address in the interview and planned my interview guide accordingly, but still ensured that I could ask follow-up questions and allow for interviews to take unexpected paths in the cases where doing so add to the richness of the data.

The interview portion of my research consisted of nine interviews, which ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length. As the interviews were conducted through Zoom, I was able to use Zoom's auto-caption function in order to transcribe the interviews, which I then edited manually to correct transcription errors. Approximately 8 hours of audio were transcribed into .txt format through this method. All interview participants were United States residents. Of the nine participants, four were women, two were men, two were nonbinary, and one was bigender. Six identified only as White, one as Ashkenazi Jewish, one as White and Latino, and one as Black/African American. Three were aroace, one was asexual and arospec, two were aromantic and acespec, two were alloromantic asexual, and one was allosexual and aromantic. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 43; the mean age of participants was approximately 25 years old, and the median age was 22. My interview guide is included as an appendix at the end of this paper (see Appendix A).

Analysis

These two methodologies allowed me to collect data in a manner that counterbalances each of the methodologies' respective disadvantages. The former method of discourse analysis let me collect a large quantity of data, which was

[4] Defined as an interview format "where the questions are pre-planned prior to the interview but the interviewer gives the interviewee the chance to elaborate and explain particular issues through the use of open-ended questions" (Alsaawi, 2014)

necessary in order to get an overview of how the community as a whole experiences and feels about various issues related to my thesis topic, and pulling posts from a variety of sites ensured that I did not limit myself to a single online community, as restricting myself to just one site could result in finding discussions only in an echo chamber[5] rather than seeing on which issues the aspec community is in general agreement, and which are more polarizing or individualized. Since I aimed, too, to gather detail from a variety of posts types, I was able to find posts that were intended to share information or personal narratives, such as those in blog posts and video essays; as well as posts intended for discussion, debate, and reflection (Ziegler et al., 2014), such as the data collected from comment sections and forum posts. While the discourse analysis method provides a breadth of data, the personal interviews provide depth that cannot be obtained through the prior method, as in an interview setting I can gain more profound insight into the participants' media experiences. Additionally, the private setting of the interview, with the assurance of anonymity in the final publication, can allow interview subjects to share personal experiences that they may not have been comfortable sharing in a more public setting (Mazanderani & Paparini, 2015) such as social media posts and public comment boards and fora.

Taking cue from prior studies that examine gender and sexuality in online spaces through discourse analysis (Farrell et al., 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2022)[6], my analysis of the qualitative data involved initial categorization and then deep reading[7] of the collected comments and interview transcripts to look for recurring themes in order to determine the aspects of the media-viewing experience most prescient within the community

[5] A phenomenon wherein content algorithms and selective exposure curate an online space in which a closed environment of like-minded people shoot down or block divergent viewpoints (Villa et al., 2021)

[6] Farrell et al.'s 2019 study examined misogyny within Reddit communities. Jacoben et al.'s 2022 study examined gatekeeping practices within the transgender community on Tumblr.

[7] Deep reading refers to reading for long-term retention of the material and for comprehension at a level that can be perspective-transforming, constructing meaning as one reads (Roberts & Roberts, 2008)

studied. First, after gathering the social media posts and comments and sound bites from the interview transcripts into a single document, I went over the data to categorize them based on 1) whether they referenced romance/aromanticism, sex/asexuality, or both; 2) whether they reflected a positive, negative, or neutral opinion toward the media in question; and 3) which specific pieces of media or fandoms were referenced. As shown in the body of the paper below, some media or fandom are given particular prevalence in the analysis of the media landscape and in aspec viewers' media diets; these media were selected to be highlighted based on the frequency with which particular examples are brought up by research subjects.

After this initial phase, I conducted deep reading by re-reading the data to familiarize myself with data as much as possible to look for patterns and focusing on which issues and opinions were most prevalent within the dataset. This phase can be designated the thematic analysis - a "method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" that "allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun & Clarke, 2012); the themes used for my analysis were identified and labeled over the course of repeated readings of the data.

The emergent themes within the data could be divided into two categories, "content" and "experience". The former category, content, refers to discussions and comments of the media itself, including characters, narrative tropes, and representation of sexualities and romantic orientations. Themes within this category included "Mockery", in which characters who are aspec or who do not engage in sexual or romantic relationships are treated as the butt of jokes; "Inhumanity", in which attraction is tied to one's humanity or where lack of attraction is associated with inhuman characters such as robots or aliens; and "Curing/Fixing", in which characters who do not experience attraction or reject the notion of engaging in sex/romance are fixed within the narrative

so that they change their mind and become capable of attraction after all. The latter category, experience, refers to discussions specifically about how the media made aspec audiences members feel, perceive themselves, or alter their personal behavior. Themes within this category included “Isolation”, in which the prevalence of romance/sex in media made aspec viewers feel that their own lack of attraction was unique to themselves; “Pressure”, in which they either felt a pressure to or actively did engage in sexual/romantic activity in response to the media making such activity seem necessary or desirable; and “Enjoyment”, in which the presence of sex and/or romance impacts an aspec viewer’s ability to enjoy or engage with a piece of media.

This method of thematic analysis allowed me to identify salient issues that are reflected or propagated through media; the comments and soundbites gathered for this study represent the audience's views, feelings, and experiences with these issues, as well as instances of mass media that were particularly impactful toward the community as a whole. The body of this paper will look at these themes and the insights into said themes offered by aspec media consumers, as well as providing cultural and academic context to the media in question. In this manner, my method for constructing this paper can best be likened to the scavenger methodology, defined as a methodology that “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (Halberstam, 1998); as such methodology is useful in incorporating fringe and niche works and experiences into the study alongside more visible work, it is particularly beneficial for a study into a queer community (Lymn & Leah, 2017).

Reflexivity

It is important for me to disclose that I am aromantic and asexual myself, and have been heavily involved in online aspec communities, as well as audience and fan communities for movies and TV shows, for several years. I did my best to ensure that

my own personal experiences within these communities did not bias the process of data collecting or the results of the analysis, and that I represent the diversity of community experiences within this report rather than giving prevalence to those that more closely match my own, although I acknowledge that some level unconscious skewing was likely unavoidable.

However, in addition to the risks of partiality, my involvement within online aspec communities did provide advantages for me as well. Finding relevant data was a relatively easy task for me due to already knowing about subreddits, Tumblr communities, and forum sites dedicated to asexuality and aromanticism, and how to navigate these sites. I also went into this project with prior knowledge issues that are common talking points within these communities, as well as - due to my own history of seeking out aspec representation in media - familiarity with the characters and shows frequently brought up in discussions on the topic of media visibility.

My identity as an aroace researcher also benefited me in terms of rapport with research participants. I was able to find common ground with interview subjects right at the beginning of our interviews that could help set them at ease, and could go off script to delve deeper when participants brought up topics that I knew to be particularly poignant or touchy within aspec spaces.

Aspec Consumers and Mass Media

From the Outside Looking In

While this paper as it goes on will look more deeply into more specific aspects of the aspec media experience, it is first prudent to look into how, as a whole, the presence of romantic and sexual narrative elements affects aspec consumers purely from a standpoint of enjoyment. After all, how entertained a person is by the media they consume strongly influences the outcome of their engagement with media content, such

how they retain the lessons put forth in the media, their likeliness to seek out more media of the same type, and the emotions they feel toward the story, characters, and creators of the media (Vorderer et al., 2004).

Although people who are aromantic and asexual experience little to no romantic or sexual attraction, respectively, toward others in real life, their feelings toward sex and romance in general vary greatly from person to person. The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project lays out a scale of favorability to repulsion that is commonly used in the aspec community to describe one's relationship with sex and/or romance. Those who are sex- or romance-favorable enjoy or are interested in activities, relationships or content that incorporate sex/romance. Those who are -neutral are neither interested in nor opposed to such activities or content; they may be all right with seeing or participating in such content, but are unlikely to specifically seek it out. Those who are -averse do not enjoy, want to participate in, or engage with such relationships or content. And those who are -repulsed experience feelings of revulsion, repellance, dread, or even fear toward sex/romance. Where an aspec person lands on the scale can vary based on the circumstances.

This scale of favorable to repulsed can also be applied toward aspec viewers' interactions with media, and a person's favorability toward sex/romance in real life can differ from their feelings toward it in media content. Some aspec media consumers find enjoyment in interacting with romantic or sexual content. Amongst this paper's interview subjects, participants expressed liking romantic content that helped fuel character development or bring the characters happiness. Within the comments included for discourse analysis, other users provided reasons for still enjoying the content in a fictional setting:

> I really like the concept of this deep emotional connection between people, I don't really get the crush part at the beginning, but I tend to ignore that and just let my imagination run with the concept. (lyck on AVEN)
>
> I really like to read romance stories. But when it comes to real life relationships (wether or not I'm involved in them) I absolutely can't stand it. For example I feel happy for the couple in a story when they say "I love you" for the first time but I am really annoyed by my sister and her boyfriend. (ElriaaStryder on Reddit)
>
> The way I see it is: I love reading about cool characters fending off beasts through ancient arcane magic and flashy sword moves. But I wouldn't want to be in that situation myself. I like reading romantic relationships between characters too. But I don't want one myself. (Forrbidden_Rice on Reddit)
>
> Some relationships in media are protrayed well, are healthy and you sense the characters really want to have that kind of relationship. In that case it'd be normal you'd be rooting them cuz it's cute. (deleted user on Reddit)

Others have more neutral or ambivalent feelings:

> Not repulsed just not my thing, feel the same way about romance as I do avocado. I don’t understand why everyone is so obsessed with it and tries to force it into every facet of life, but I’m not going to let them ruin my day. (Ksbbiggs49 on Reddit)
>
> I love romance sometimes and think it's amazing. I enjoy romance books and books with romance. But other times? I'm terribly bored and tired of romance and think it's just clunky and ruins a good piece of entertainment. I love romance, especially with my fictional characters and my own stories. Other times I hate it. Other times I just love it. I have a love hate relationship with romance. (14_Hiatus on Reddit)
>
> I always see romance as a good(but not entirely necessary) spice to add to a story. and since you can't have a meal made up entirely of spice, pure romance stories never makes sense/feels weird/silly. (greay as ice on AVEN)
>
> I’m lucky to not be bothered by discussions of romantic love or portrayals in media; in fact, I enjoy them most of the time. Conversely, there are a lot of times I get annoyed by these storylines, especially how they have to be in everything, even when a romantic subplot seems entirely extraneous and the characters have no chemistry. (corelliaxdreaming on Tumblr)
>
> It varies for me, depending on what mood I'm in. I'm more appreciative of it at some times more than others. I do tend to like romance plots if there's some progression to it and you can see it growing and becoming a thing, or developing from a bit of a thing into a deeper kind of love, but I can't stand it when someone

> shoehorns it into an otherwise perfectly good story just because (StormHarrier on AVEN)

Among those who do enjoy romantic or sexual content, though, their experiences with such media do not feel the same as the experiences of allo consumers. Part of that is, naturally, the inability to relate to the feelings of attraction displayed within the narratives. Many of this paper's subjects felt that having an outsider's perspective on these relationships changed the way they viewed them, often turning toward a more critical perspective. Interviewee Anna says that: "I'm very hypercritical of romantic content, because I don't have, like, the goggles of romance on most of the time. So I tend to do a lot more analysis and be like, No, this is not good. This is not good writing," and interviewee Paige concurs: "I feel like I'm a bit more objective when it comes to relationships [in fiction], because it's like I'm on the outside looking in. So I'm just like, why are they doing that, that makes no sense? Or it drives me crazy when they don't communicate, when a problem could be fixed with two sentences."

The feeling of being more aware of the problematic nature of many common narrative steps and tropes found in romance-heavy media was a common one among those users studied. Many commenters expressed annoyance or exhaustion with the romanticization of negative behaviors in relationships and pursuits thereof, from the gender roles enforced by romcoms to refusals to take "no" for an answer to normalization of abusive behaviors. For example, MistakeWonderful9178 on Reddit states in a discussion thread of relationship logic in movies:

> Doesn't anyone notice how a bunch of toxic tropes are infested in well known romcoms? The "love at first" shtick which is impossible and is only about liking someone's appearance, pursuing and stalking someone who already said no to said romantic advances and romantic gestures that "somehow make everything better?" [...] I know they're just movies with unrealistic expectations of romance and relationships, but it's crazy about how many people not only put romance on a pedestal but will glorify toxic behavior in those movies, romanticize abuse and

> bash others who clearly see how dangerous that is. Stalking, love bombing and harassing people shouldn't be seen as "romantic" ever.

Generally, there also seemed to be a preference toward queer romantic/sexual content over stories with heterosexual, heteroromantic couples. Some attribute this to queer relationships being less overdone in media, such as AVEN user Shanjace, who wrote: "It's most likely cause hetero romances have been (dare i say) the norm in media for decades so its so refreshing to see queer people on tv, ya know?" Interviewee Bre discussed how queer romance and sex in media tended to focus more on the characters' relationship dynamic rather than their physicality, while their straight counterparts had to cater more to the male gaze: "I feel like a lot of the time when it's a man having sex, as a woman there's often like, there's so much like machismo, or like that the gender roles that even during this private moment has to be fit into. And so then that means that there has to be some aggression on the part of the man, and then there has to be some submission, or like some very disingenuous pleasure on the part of the woman that is very boring to me."

While there are plenty of aces and aros who can find enjoyment in fictional sex and romance, of the interview subjects and commenters studied here, the most common feeling toward sexual and romantic content in media seemed to be aversion. The majority of aspec viewers report such content as having a negative impact of their enjoyment of or ability to engage with the media they watch:

> I'm okay with real life romance because I don't often come across weird stuff like people being obsessed etc - they're mostly just drawn to someone they have feelings for and that's okay. Fictional romance, on the other hand, is terrible 99% of the time if you ask me. It happens rarely that it doesn't feel superficial or forced to me and so I've taken quite a big dislike to it. Thanks, Hollywood. (Satin on AVEN)

> I can never fucking enjoy shows because they keep throwing so many romance plots in there. I thought it was just me being annoyed at cliche love triangles but I'm starting to realize it's just all of it (KittyQueen_Tengu on Reddit)

> Many themes and plots attract me to watch and read. And this romantic and sex stuff makes me drop them. It's traumatizing. (confused-nobody-8181 on Reddit)
>
> Being aro and wanting to consume media can be so frustrating. Constantly being bombarded with romance in books, movies, tv shows, plays/musicals, etc. can be super annoying, especially if you're not in the mood for that type of entertainment. (arospecinitiative on Tumblr)
>
> Reasonable sex scenes don't bother me. But when they're frequent and unnecessary to the story, I can get annoyed. The worst is when there's sexual violence inserted solely for shock value. I really liked most of the first few seasons of AHS [*American Horror Story*], got really excited when season 4 skipped all of the especially creepy sex stuff, and then stopped watching when the next season began with a nasty, violent sex scene. I wish I could watch the rest of the seasons, but I just can't overlook it. (EnbySim on Reddit)
>
> Does it count as romance repulsion if the moment something romance related comes up in media, you feel completely tuned off, and even kinda hurt? 'Cause most of the times a friendship becomes a romance, I've been pretty emotionally invested in it. I won't like it if it becomes romantic because then, I can't relate to it anymore. (aromantic-official on Tumblr)

It is certainly understandable that many in the aspec community find their media experience tainted by the prevalence of sex and romance within it. After all, the way that these topics are framed in mass media are often far from welcoming to ace and aro identities, and can contribute heavily to the notion that so many aspecs feel for the longest time: that not enjoying these relationships, not having these feelings of attraction toward other people, is indication of something inherently wrong.

A Problem to Solve

On January 23rd, 2012, a new episode of the hit medical drama *House, M.D.* aired on Fox to an audience of 8.76 million viewers (Seidman, 2011). Among these millions of viewers were members of the asexual community who anticipated getting to see themselves represented on the screen for the first time in their lives.

Ten days before the episode, entitled "Better Half", aired, a sneak peek had been posted on spoilertv.com, depicting a scene between the titular Dr. House and his colleague Dr. Wilson. Wilson tells House about a new patient his, who told him that she

is asexual, and is married to an asexual man. House is immediately dismissive of the claim. He asks Wilson, “What is she, a pool of algae?” and insinuates that the husband might be gay. When Wilson tells House that there was nothing medically wrong with the woman besides a slight bladder infection, House proposes a bet: “Hundred bucks says I can find a medical reason why she doesn’t want to have sex.

AVEN user RandomDent posted a link to this sneak peek as new topic on the AVEN forum on January 14, 2012, stating that he was “super excited and terrified at the same time” (RandomDent). He cautioned other forum members to “not be automatically horrified” as the attitude displayed in the sneak peek is simply a core aspect of House as a character: he wants to find a medical reason for everything. They have yet to see how the show’s writers will handle the topic of asexuality.

Other members of the forum seem to have shared the sentiments, as the thread comments leading up to the episode’s release display a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Some were extremely optimistic, like Faelights who wrote that “I can't wait to be able to tell people I identify as asexual, and have them say, ‘Oh right, I've heard about that before!’” or Megaframe, who had faith in the show’s writers to handle the topic of asexuality with respect: “I'm sure they won't cop-out and depict asexuality as a medical problem, that really doesn't sound like something the show House would do”. Others were more cautious, with some pointing out that the structure of the show seems to always require problems to be solved rather than simply explained - “they are overfond of giving medical reasons for everything” (The Great WTF) - or expressed worry about the potential consequences of asexuality being mishandled: “It would be very bad if House finds a cause for this ‘asexuality’ and millions of people watching get the wrong idea” (Wineblood). But regardless of where they sat on the scale of optimism vs. pessimism, the overall atmosphere on the forum was one of fervent anticipation. Everyone was going to tune in to watch; some users stated that they had never seen

House before, or it had been years since they last watched it, but would be tuning in solely to watch this episode.

The episode aired. The shift on the forum from nervous anticipation to horror was clear. The very first comment left on the thread after the episode had ended, posted by a user named Kavilk, succinctly summed up how the episode's asexuality sub-plot had been handled by the writers: "Well they dropped the ball on that one."

After looking over the bloodwork of Wilson's asexual female patient yielded no results for House, he instead brought her husband in under false pretenses in order to run tests on him. That's when he makes a startling discovery: her husband has a tumor on his pituitary gland. This tumor has been lowering his libido and causing erectile dysfunction. So it turns out he wasn't asexual after all. And what of the wife, whose asexuality could not be explained away by a medical anomaly? The solution to that mystery was even more simple: she was lying. She had been allosexual all along, but had claimed to be asexual in order to spare her husband's feelings. No longer were the two of them trapped in a sexless marriage built on a "seriously troubled world view", as House calls asexuality - they can go on after the credits roll to have a real relationship for the first time, and finally live happily ever after.

Setting aside, for the sake of brevity, the fact that libido and sexual attraction are not the same thing and that erectile dysfunction is unrelated to sexual orientation (Ferguson, 2021) - and that the propagation of such misinformation makes it startlingly clear how little research went into the writing of this subplot - the theme most strongly perpetuated by this story is the pathologization of asexuality. Asexuality has a long history of pathologization within the medical field; asexual individuals report medical practitioners disbelieving them about their orientation and sexual history, dismissing or ignoring information or explanations of asexuality, misdiagnosing sexual disorders such

as hyposexual desire disorder, and attemping to explain asexuality away as a side effect of relationship problems or past trauma (Flanagan & Peters, 2020).

Such pathologization is easy for asexual individuals to internalize. In a video essay condemning the episode eight years after its airing, Youtuber David J. Bradley describes the impact that this episode, at its time the only instance of a major network featuring a character who identifies as asexual, has on the perception of asexuality:

> This set the standard for people's understanding of this orientation, of my orientation. Almost nine million people watched this episode when it first aired, and more since, and were taught that the correct way to respond when someone tells you that they're asexual is with cynicism and disbelief. To look on this valid sexual orientation as a symptom of illness, or as a lie. That's why I think this episode is still worth talking about. Media has an influence on people, whether they know it or not, and the effect of this kind of thinking towards a marginalised group can potentially be really harmful.

The comments on the video from asexual people sharing their own experiences with the episode and the way it pathologized asexuality support Bradley's explanation of the episode's negative influence on the ace community. For some, who had already been identifying with the asexual label at the time the episode aired, the show made them question the validity of their own identity, such as the users who wrote:

> This episode made me question my asexuality so much! I remember I kept wondering "was there just something wrong with my body that I hadn't figured out yet and that's why I was this way?" (Linda NIse)

> I binge watched House a couple years ago (while I was still contemplating my possibility of being asexual no less) and came across the episode. I hated it because it felt so invalidating and confusing, and it seriously made me doubt myself. It's a while since then now and I've overcome the doubts and am identifying as asexual, but I will never let go of the grudge I have against that single episode. (Sam D.)

For others, the episode was their first exposure to the concept of asexuality, and influenced their view of themselves as they later began to figure out their sexual orientation:

> This episode was my first experience with asexuality and as I grew up I genuinely thought that all I needed was the correct medication to be normal. I also still have lingering shame over subjecting someone to a non-sexual relationship. (Tom Rosbotham)
>
> I was a young teen when I first saw this episode. I watched it with my mom and I felt very iffy about the episode 'disproving' asexuality, so I mentioned my discomfort with that theme out loud. My mom told me she doesn't believe in asexuality. Years later, I'm afraid to come out as ace to her because I absolutely don't want to go through the ordeal of trying to validate my identity, and every time the subject of relationships or attraction comes up, I remember this episode of house and have a viscerally uncomfortable reaction that leaves me off-kilter for hours. So. Yeah. Maybe if media didn't treat my orientation as a joke and represent it completely wrongly, I wouldn't have struggled for years to come to terms with it. (Daisy)

Still, as distressing as *House*'s handling of asexuality was, it is not unique in its treatment of the aspec community, just unusually blatant. *House*'s "Better Half" may have been the first time that a major television network featured a fictional character who identified as asexual, but it was not the first time asexuality as a concept had been shown on such a mainstream platform. Asexual and aromantic activists have campaigned for visibility for decades, and in the early 2000s, David Jay, who founded AVEN in 2001, was one of the community's most prominent spokespeople. During this time, Jay made various appearances on news and talk shows (Filipová, 2021), including, in addition to appearances on cable networks such as MSNBC and MTV, two 2006 appearances on ABC - one on daytime talk show *The View*, and one on the primetime news program *20/20*.

These early television appearances handled the topic of asexuality just as poorly as *House* did years later, if not moreso. Jay was mocked by the hosts of *The View* throughout his appearance. Host Joy Behar especially seemed determined to determined to misunderstand asexuality, and continually suggested reasons for why he was not actually asexual; she told him that he was simply repressed, that he was too lazy to engage in sexual activity, that he was scared to face the reality of adult

relationships. The responses to the interview, as shown through the comments of an archived version of this interview on Youtube, are clear in their frustration toward the hosts and how the topic of asexuality was presented. Commenters were in agreement that the video was enraging; various comments refer to users' "blood boiling" (butterscotchwm), them "being close to tears" (AnimaSola3o4), and several admitting they couldn't sit through the whole video. The hosts are described in the comments as ignorant, rude, unprofessional, and disrespectful, and Jay is praised for maintaining a calm demeanor even as he is talked over and mocked. As one commenter (Eowyn of Rohan) put it: "Oh. My. Goodness. I don't even know where to start...the skepticism, the constant interruptions, or the personal questions ("do you like having sex with yourself?"). He is trying to tell them who he is, who WE are, and he gets nothing but disrespect. Arrrgh."

Jay's appearance on *20/20* was no better. Asexuality was introduced in the segment as "an odd choice" rather than an orientation, and, like the hosts of *The View*, the reporters interviewing Jay and other asexual guests brought in for the segment treated asexuality with derision and skepticism. The segment also included a professional sex therapist, Joy Davidson, who concurred with the reporters' views that asexuality was wrong. Davidson suggested various potential 'causes' of asexuality, such as trauma, abuse, repression, and hormonal imbalance, and stated that "sex is a fabulous, enormously pleasurable aspect of life and your saying you don't miss it is like someone, in a sense, who's colorblind, saying 'I don't miss color.' Of course you don't miss what you've never had" (ABC News) - a statement that, in addition to being simply inaccurate, shows just how little the supposed expert knew about asexuality and the asexual community, as it is far from uncommon for asexual individuals to not figure out their orientation until after they've been sexually active, or to have sex even after

knowing their orientation for a variety of reasons including reproduction, physical stimulation, or the sake of an allosexual partner (Brunning & McKeever, 2021).

The way these shows characterize asexuality as a problem to be solved is certainly appalling, but not shocking - while the term “asexual” and the aspec community have only recently gained what little visibility they have in the public sphere, media dating back long before the appearances has shown characters who begin their stories uninterested in sex or romance, only to later discover that it was something they needed in their life all along. A commenter on David Bradley’s video about “Better Half” put it thusly:

> I've noticed that in more than a few films, Asexuality/Aromanticism became the thing to "cure". The actual term of Asexual/Aromantic wouldn't be used, but one character would be disinterested in a relationship or something like that, this would usually be presented as a bad thing, and then another character would come along and be that special person to give the first character their "sexual awakening". (Asexual Individual)

The majority of my interview subjects pointed out how common this story device is especially in romantic comedies, such as those presented on The Hallmark Channel[8]. A woman is, by all appearances, extremely successful in life: she’s beautiful, educated, wealthy, has a great career and exciting hobbies. And amidst all of this success, she asserts that she doesn’t need to get married. She’d rather be independent, or she doesn’t have time for romance. But she is not truly fulfilled. Even if she believes she’s happy, there is an emptiness in her life that is only filled when the man of her dreams shows up, thaws out her cold heart, and becomes the new focus of her life. This is her happy ending.

Another example frequently pointed to as a stark illustration of asexuality and aromanticism is the character Sheldon Cooper in the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory.*

[8] An American cable channel known for its original TV movies, the vast majority of which depict romance stories marketed as family-friendly and inspirational

While the terms “asexual” and “aromantic” are not used in the show itself to describe the character, throughout the first few seasons, Sheldon makes it clear how little interest he has in dating or sex. He considers such pursuits wastes of time, brushes off any attempt made to flirt with him, sees no point in engaging in sexual intercourse for any reason outside of reproduction (and even in that case, is certain that technology will soon render that action obsolete as will), and is annoyed by the drama that his friends’ romantic and sexual relationships cause. But this aspect of his character is not treated as a valid orientation; it is an oddity, a character flaw that leaves him disconnected from the people around him. It’s weird, it’s awkward, and it’s *bad*.

When the show introduced the new character of Amy Farrah-Fowler, Sheldon’s gender-swapped counterpoint who mirrors him in nearly all mannerisms, their relationship is initially one of convenience. Sheldon agrees to pretend to be in a romantic and sexual relationship with Amy, in order to get the latter’s mother to stop pestering her to find a partner. In later appearances, though, the character of Amy changes drastically: while previously she seemed to have the same disinterest toward sex and romance as Sheldon, now she suddenly is infatuated with him. She flirts constantly with him, makes tireless sexual advances on him, and eventually, her efforts pay off. Slowly Sheldon begins agreeing to date, accepting the label of “boyfriend”, reciprocating her feelings, and, by the series’ end, he and Amy are married and sexually active with each other. As one blogger (Conrad, 2019) sums it up:

> It borders on harassment and grows into nothing short of coercion, inviting the viewer to believe if enough ‘encouragement’ is given to an asexual person they will cease being asexual, that if an asexual-identified person is given enough information on societal norms in regards to sex and romance they will have a sudden bout of insight that they weren’t asexual after all–that, perhaps, asexuality wasn’t A Thing. And, yes, within the show Sheldon is told what all Queer folks have been told: you just haven’t found the right person.

Another work consistently brought up in discussions of this story beat is the 2005 film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. The film's premise is encompassed in its title: a forty-year-old man has never had sex. The story centers around Andy, a nerdy loser (as described within the film) whose friends, after discovering that he is still a virgin, are determined to get him laid for the first time. While the film's reception from asexual audiences is mixed, with some AVEN users in a discussion of the film feeling that Andy was portrayed sympathetically, and that the narrative actually seemed to conclude that sex is not a necessity and that it a person shouldn't be pressured into having sex if they don't feel ready or comfortable, the premise and, moreover, the general audience response to that premise, makes it clear just how deeply the idea that not having sex is something to be ridiculed is engrained in our media.

An AVEN user (Pseudonym) who began a discussion thread about this film shared their experience with allosexual audiences who had viewed the movie with them or discussed it with them afterward:

> 'How could ANYONE get to 40 without having SEX?' The notion that people were so completely flabbergast at the idea was astounding to me. Even my friends who are virgins thought it was ridiculous that someone could ever reach that age without doing it. The story of the 40 year old virgin was blatantly fictional and the characters exaggerated, but they were grossly relatable to real people and the pressure society puts on people: 'sex is normal'. [...] Yeah, it's a comedy. Lots of comedies intend to cross borders and be borderline if not completely offensive, but the people I've talked with about it actually treated this like a unrealistic situation (that being the virginal aspect of it) that was made into a romantic comedy.

A word brought up frequently in both one-on-one interviews and in social media posts is "broken". Many aces and aros describe feeling broken before discovering the terminology to define their experiences with sex and romance, and the community that comes with it. And even after having access to this vocabulary and community, frequently aspec people follow the map of identity formation outlined by Cass (1984),

wherein upon first realizing their difference from the general allo population, they keep the revelation to themselves and continue to put up a front.

Tumblr user unicorngender wrote in a post regarding this experience: “I’ve seen a lot of aromantic people wishing they weren’t aro. Reconciling yourself with the fact that you don’t need to feel romantic love to be complete or having worth is SO HARD when you have everything around you telling you different.” Reddit user 1truesmidge stated in a discussion post about romantic comedies: “I despise most love stories in general for making me feel like there was something wrong with me for my romantic and sexual orientation” - specifying the compulsory sexuality (Baugh, 2019) displayed in media as the source of this feeling of brokenness.

When everything around aces and aros seems to paint them as being broken, the next logical conclusion is to fix it. Like in the cases of the not-actually-asexual characters in *House* and the very real asexual guests on *20/20*, often the attempts to diagnose and fix a lack of sexual or romantic attraction comes from outside sources. In addition the previously discussed misdiagnoses of sexual disorders, this desire to fix aspec people can result in harsh and traumatizing treatment. A 2018 national survey conducted by the Government Equalities Office in the United Kingdom found that asexual people were more likely to have been offered or have undergone conversion therapy than were bisexual, pansexual, and gay respondents, and drugs such as filibanserin remain on the market and in prescription pads as a “cure” for lack of sexual interest (McAlpine, 2017).

Perhaps the most alarming method of “fixing” aspec orientations is the increased risk of sexual assault (Decker, 2015), especially in the form of corrective rape. Defined as “the rape of any member of a group that does not conform to gender or sexual orientation norms where the motive of the perpetrator is to ‘correct’ the individual” (Doan-Minh, 2019), asexual women and men alike (Frantz, 2011) face the risk of being coerced

or even violently forced into sex in order to right a perceived wrong. And the portrayals of asexuality as something to be cured, as the result of some external "reason" such as those that the hosts on *The View* were so eager to find, serves only to lend credence to those who are committing these assaults (Mosbergen, 2017). As Tumblr user toomanylokifeels describes it: "People actually think that "corrective" rape will change someone's sexual identity. It starts with people asserting your orientation does not exist [...] Then people assume things about yourself that "made you the way you are." Then people move into threats territory. Then people move into the actions part."

Acting on Pressure

While the pressure from others in an aspec person's life to pursue sex and romance and efforts from outside forces to fix the perceived problem of asexuality or aromanticism certainly pose significant threats to aspec media consumers, it is also quite common for that pressure to become internalized. Media has provided a blueprint for social growth that positions benchmarks of romantic and sexual relationships as essential life milestones, and it is extremely difficult to deviate from that blueprint when it is the only one that has been presented. As Baugh (2019) states, "because TV plays such a large role in the creation of culture and social understanding, society would take cues from media even concerning the most private aspects of life such as sexuality and intimacy."

Acting on an internalized pressure to date or have sex was a common experience shared in online discussions of the impact of amatonormativity. Comments on websites like Youtube and Tumblr detail the actions that aspec users have taken and how they feel having placed themselves into romantic and sexual situations they have been taught to want:

> I had no idea about asexuality or aromanticism as a teen/young adult and spent most of that time thinking there was something wrong with me or I was broken,

> and ended up doing things I didn't want to, or didn't even feel comfortable doing, just to fit in and hope maybe it would fix me. These actions were partially due to the environment around me. No one ever told me I was wrong when I said I thought I was broken. (crazy-addict on Tumblr)
>
> I have a lot of trauma and confusion around love just from the way I was conditioned to believe romance to work. As young as five, in order to fit in, I would declare I had crushes on people of the opposite gender just because i thought they were neat or we had something in common, because i had no idea what attraction was. (Cyndrift on Youtube)
>
> I put myself into anxiety causing situations for my "crushes". I put myself in a romantic relationship that caused me panic attacks almost every day- not because of my girlfriend, but because I was so unhappy in a romantic relationship (aggressivelyaromantic on Tumblr)

Many of the participants I interviewed related to the experience, particularly before having the language to label themselves as aromantic or asexual, and thus difficulty pinning down their own desires and needs. Such pressure was especially prevalent during teen years - understandably, as TV shows and films aimed at teen audiences are particularly saturated with romantic and sexual contact (Morais, 2021). One interviewee, V, describes her expectations going into high school:

> When I was in high school, I had grown up on a bunch of media, and I was really excited for school. I was expecting feelings to fly, all that kind of stuff. But as the years went on, the first couple of years I would say I wasn't feeling anything that everyone said should be happening at that time. When someone did ask me out, I felt nervous. I felt uncomfortable. I just felt nothing toward them. And I was questioning, was something wrong with me? I just didn't know what was happening.

Another interviewee, Bernard, stated:

> Growing up we're bombarded in the media with heterogeneous ideas. Like we should all be in this area of sex, and sex is very natural, and there's gonna come a point when it's just gonna feel right. All I've heard for most of my teenage and upward life is, sex is this great thing, and you're not an adult until you've had sex.

In Bernard's case, the pressure extended well past high school. A recent divorcee in his early forties, Bernard had gone through the motions of following that pathway laid out for him in the media and by his friends and family. This included getting married and having

a physical relationship with his wife. Although Bernard was clear that he did deeply care for his ex-wife, and their divorce was perfectly amicable (as he and his ex-wife had both individually experienced revelations about their sexual orientations), the romantic and sexual aspects of the relationship had held no particular appeal for him, and part of his own realization of being aroace came from the fact that he knew that he felt no need for that sort of relationship:

> I was like, okay, well, I'm married. We're married and married couples have sex. So I guess we should be having it. So it didn't come naturally to me. It was kind of like, well, we haven't had sex for a week. We haven't had sex for two weeks. We haven't had sex for three weeks. I think, you know, I should ask for sex, because that's what we're supposed to do.

The messaging in mass media is clear about both the high value society places upon sexual and romantic relationships, and the inevitability of such relationships existing and taking precedence within one's life. The reach of mass media, too, ensures that identical messaging is imparted to a vast audience, one unrestricted by other social differences such as geographical location or class; with a reach so wide and so narrow an approach to relationships and love, the media "is a powerful source in disseminating information and shaping opinion, exposing people from many different social settings to the same messages" (Coombe & Davis, 2013).

Beginning Early

With the message being as prominent as it is, it is nigh impossible to be a consumer of mass media without having had these ideals presented, even from an extremely young age. Multiple interview subjects recalled Disney movies, such as 1950's *Cinderella* or 1989's *The Little Mermaid*, impressing upon them a desire to find true love, get married, and live happily ever after. One interviewee, Rick, recalled the influence that a Saturday morning cartoon they watched as a child, Disney's *Recess*, had on their perception of romance during their elementary school years:

> I had loved this show, always thought the stories were so exciting, and one character, Spinelli, she was basically a role model for me as a little kid. I wanted to be her, to have a school life like she had. And romance wasn't a big part of the show at all, but there were a couple of episodes, like, one that's all about her getting her first crush. And the message was basically, it's okay and good to fall in love no matter how tough you are, it's part of "blooming", was the word they used.
>
> Another episode, an older kid is telling the characters how when they're older, they're going to like kissing, and everything about life is going to be just about kissing and dating, and Spinelli and another character decide to kiss to test it out. And it's a huge event, all the kids from the school come to watch, and when they kiss there's rainbows and sparkles and stuff on the screen. And it all looked super exciting to me. Like, it was a big happy thing and felt grown-up and just, like, important.
>
> And for years I kept hoping someone in my class would get a crush on me, or ask to kiss me, so I would get to experience it too. Took years, finally had my first kiss in eighth grade, I think. And I was like, that's it? It wasn't exciting or grown-up, it was just, I don't know, awkward. It was weird and I felt nothing. I remember I cried about it that night, thinking I'd messed up my first kiss or wasted it or something.

Such feelings toward romance being molded at such a young age were common in online posts I found from within the aspec community, but ace and aro kids were not alone in being influenced by these narratives. Past academic studies on heteronormativity in media reveal how pervasive themes of romantic relationships - specifically, romantic relationships between characters of opposite binary genders - are in media aimed at children. A content analysis of kids' films from the 1990s and early 2000s showed that "romantic heterosexual relationships are portrayed as a special, distinct, exceptional form of relationship, different from all others. Characters frequently defy parents, their culture, or their very selves to embrace a hetero-romantic love that is transformative, powerful, and (literally) magical" (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). The impact such portrayals have on children is also well-documented in academia. (Kelley et al., 1999) observed children incorporating romantic elements, such as dating games, that they had seen on TV into their play with other children, and (Martin, 2009) saw that

children as young as three established ideas and expectations for concepts such as marriage and weddings based on examples they witnessed in movies.

In several Reddit discussion threads, asexual commenters, particularly those who were sex-repulsed, discussed their preference for media aimed at younger audiences due to the lack of sexual content in family-friendly media, but romantic content was unavoidable, regardless of genre or target audience. Even if a romantic relationship is not the primary plotline of a film, secondary plots about romantic relationships are frequently featured and incorporated into the main character's happy ending. "While removing the hetero-romantic story line would still leave other stories in place in such films, the romance nonetheless exists" (Martin & Kazyak, 2009).

While the interview participants and internet users analyzed in this paper have grown well past the age in which they were the target demographic for children's media, that media itself persists in its amatonormative messaging toward children still today. Aromantic commenters found themselves alienated by the importance placed on straight romance in recent media, including TV movie franchises such as *Descendants* and *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S*, theatrical films such as *Toy Story 4*, and cartoon series such as *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* and *Amphibia*. One writer points to 2019's *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* as a particularly egregious example:

> Girl Toothless flies off, Toothless[9] follows her, and then just… doesn't come back. While Hiccup worries, his fellow Vikings tell him that maybe it's time to let the dragon go now that he's found a mate, and "let him be happy." Um, I'm sorry, was Toothless not *happy* with Hiccup for the past five/six years?? Was Toothless not ready to sacrifice his life to save Hiccup in the first movie? Did they not share an *unbreakable bond* that withstood the unfortunate circumstances of Hiccup's father's death? [...] No, Hiccup, get over all of that and go let your bonded bestie "be happy." Because he couldn't possibly be happy without a female dragon in his life. (Gheller, 2020)

[9] Toothless is the franchise's titular dragon, and the moniker Girl Dragon is given here to his unnamed female love interest. Hiccup is the human protagonist, a dragon trainer.

This film sheds light on another message espoused by these romantic plotlines in the media. When romantic relationships are placed on such a pedestal, and depicted as the highest priority in life, it means that these relationships must be prioritized *over* something else. In many of these narratives, that in turn means that platonic relationships are the ones that must be sacrificed.

Relationship Hierarchy

The idea of one's romantic relationship taking precedence over all others is a component of amatonormativity that many people in the aspec community encounter constantly in both media and real life, and a common phrase used among aspec bloggers and essayists online to describe this phenomenon is "relationship hierarchy". Clover Chen (2022) illustrates a common instance of relationship hierarchy in action: "Have you ever witnessed a friend get completely consumed by their romantic relationship and then stop spending time with anyone else aside from their partner? That is an example of a relationship hierarchy placing the romantic relationship as paramount over the others."

For members of the aspec community who are not in romantic relationships and have no intention of pursuing such a relationship in the future, the idea of never being as important to someone as their romantic partner, as their relationship to platonic friends or family members never being as meaningful as romance, is a particularly disheartening thought. And this idea, like so many others within the structure of amatonormativity, follows aspec media consumers relentlessly through stories.

In series ranging from *The X-Files* to *Danny Phantom* to *Harry Potter*, the common theme emerges that no matter how platonic, professional, or even antagonistic the relationship is between a main male and female character at the beginning of a series, by the end of it, the two of them will have fallen in love. And while some aspec viewers enjoy the friends-to-lovers trope - with the most common reasoning in

discussions in aromantic communities being that it feels more genuine and believable than the common alternatives such as love-at-first-sight - for many, so many strong friendships in media being turned to romantic relationships is exhausting, irritating, or flat-out hurtful. As Tumblr user gayandace remarks: “Sometimes you can tell they just have them be friends as a necessity on the way to romance. It’s the feeling that romance is the True Goal.”

The language used in media and among audiences to describe these relationships often serves only to further reinforce this hierarchy. Two people who are platonic are considered “just friends”; asexualpanda27, a user on AUREA[10] illustrates the way such a term diminishes the significance of friendship:

> Anyone else hate this phrase as much as I do? "Just" friends. As if friends is somehow lesser to the holy grail of romance. Recently, my best friend from high school met a guy that she likes. She was busy texting him when we were hanging out. She wasn't listening to me. I've never felt alone with her before, not even when we were both just on our phones sitting silently in the same room. But this time I did feel alone. Because she wasn't really present with me. I get it, intellectually. First crushes are fun and exciting and addicting. But I was just hit in the face with the reminder that when my friends all have partners, I'm "just" a friend. And sometimes it feels like that's all I'll ever be. *Just*.

In the same vein of “just friends”, the term “more than friends” is used to refer to people in romantic relationships - again, emphasizing the unimportance of friendship. The idea of the “friend zone”[11] was popularized enough online to make its way into mainstream media; shows like *Supergirl*, *Gravity Falls*, and *Danger 5* have referred to it by name. TV Tropes[12] uses the label “Relationship Upgrade” to refer to instances in which two characters begin a romantic or sexual relationship with each other.

[10] A forum site that acts as a community space for aromanticism, much as AVEN does for asexuality

[11] A construct in which friendship is viewed as a consolation prize that someone settles for when they are not able to start a romantic relationship with their object of attraction (Bannister, 2019)

[12] A popular wiki site in which users document examples of various narrative features and conventions over a vast array of media (Brehob, 2013)

Posts by aspec viewers on Tumblr show how aware so many aspec consumers are of the message of relationship hierarchy being presented to them, and the way that this impacts not only their perception of their own relationships, but the perception of platonic relationships as a whole as something inherently less-than:

> I don't hate romance, man, but do you ever get sad that according to media your love can never be dramatic, cathartic or life changing? that it can't be forbidden or starcrossed or destined, that it can't catch you when you fall, give you a reason to keep going? that it would all be more meaningful if you just kissed? (thisvegetabledoesntfallinlove)

> I grew up with movies, cartoons, games, friends, and external voices saying that relationship is like a scale going from acquaintance to friend to best friend to lover. As if there were only one way to "love" someone. (3drottmnt)

> The whole friendship aspect of the bond is generally treated as this stepping stone, a temporary and lower level, and the romantic get-together is almost always treated as this Maximum Relationship Level, and it sucks, it really sucks to see this constantly play out, again and again. (bloo-the-dragon)

> I am so tired of romance, it is not a pinnacle of human connection, it's just another shade of it, and how do people not see that we're taught to think so artificially (babydonttalkthatmuch)

My interview subjects concurred; universally they were in agreement that the media they watch places a high amount of importance on sexual and romantic relationships, with such relationships often being the linchpin for character drama or happy endings within a series, far more so than platonic relationships. As one interviewee, P.E., relates her experience with this relationship hierarchy:

> There was this whole period of time where it was like, oh my god, what's my life gonna be like if I don't marry someone? All of my friends are gonna get a partner, and then, they're gonna not care about me as much. Definitely some of that is due to the media portrayal of romance where once you get a romance partner, suddenly, they're the most important person in your life and the other people who the character spent time with before, like the kooky best friends, just vanish as the story goes on and it becomes all about the dream guy.

This raises the question: what happened to the kooky best friend in the romcom? Media has provided a very narrow view of what a “happily ever after” looks like, such that the

idea of a happy ending “becomes synonymous with having the right kind of intimate life” (Dernikos, 2022): a courtship and marriage with a single partner of the opposite binary gender, having children, raising them to follow the same life outline, and eventually growing old together with one’s spouse. So what does the future look like when such a situation simply isn’t feasible? And is a happily ever after even a possibility without sex and romance?

Happily Ever After

In the 2017 book *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator: Uncommon Love and Life*, journalist Amy Gahran coins the concept of a “Relationship Escalator” to illustrate a social script[13] that has been established by the world at large for forming long-term intimate relationships. Her book defines the Relationship Escalator as follows:

> The default set of societal expectations for intimate relationships. Partners follow a progressive set of steps, each with visible markers, toward a clear goal. The goal at the top of the Escalator is to achieve a permanently monogamous (sexually and romantically exclusive between two people), cohabitating marriage — legally sanctioned if possible. In many cases, buying a house and having kids is also part of the goal. Partners are expected to remain together at the top of the Escalator until death. The Escalator is the standard by which most people gauge whether a developing intimate relationship is significant, “serious,” good, healthy, committed or worth pursuing or continuing.

The steps in the traditional Relationship Escalator as listed by Gahran include eight relationship stages: making contact, initiation, claiming and defining, establishment, commitment, merging, conclusion, and legacy. Making contact consists of the initial flirting and first dates. Initiation includes romantic courtship, emotional investment in the relationship, and, for most people, sexual contact. Claiming and defining involves declarations of love, using official terminology such as “boyfriend” and “girlfriend”, and making agreements for exclusivity. Establishment involves settling into each other’s lives

[13] A culturally embedded sequence of behaviors that a person is expected to perform in a given situation (Clair, 2005)

and instituting patterns of regular contact and communication. Commitment consists of planning for a long-term future together as a couple; merging, which is often combined with commitment, involves uniting as a singular unit, which includes moving in together, sharing finances, and getting engaged. Conclusion is finalizing the relationship through getting married. Legacy, the final stage, includes post-marriage benchmarks such as buying a home and raising children.

It is, of course, worth noting that these escalator steps are not set in stone. Romantic and sexual relationships between allo people can and do deviate from the Relationship Escalator in terms of the order of steps and even in which stages are included. This concept illustrates the most common and thus the most expected route for an intimate relationship.

Additionally, not all aspec people are barred from following the model of the Relationship Escalator, or the model's general framework. As not all people who are asexual are aromantic, some asexuals may still pursue the romantic elements included in the stages of the Relationship Escalator, but not the sexual elements; vice versa for aromantic people who are not asexual. Some asexual people may also engage in sexual acts or relationships, and some aromantic people may do the same for romantic acts or relationships. Further, some aspec people desire or actively pursue particularly actions or relationship types because they still want or enjoy the concept in general, even if they do not feel attraction toward any person[14].

Still, aspecs as a group remain much more likely than allos to be unable to follow the Relationship Escalator. For many alloromantic asexuals and aromantic allosexual, it can be extremely difficult to find a partner who is willing to pursue the type of relationship they want or to respect boundaries they'd like to maintain. For those who are not sex-

[14] Such orientations fall under the microlabels of "cupiosexual" and "cupioromantic" (Nourished By Life, 2022)

favorable or romance-favorable, engaging in sexual or romantic actions without that attraction there simply isn't a viable option for a healthy relationship. And for some, any sexual or romantic action is completely undesirable and off the table.

For those who aren't able to engage in the typical structure of romantic and sexual relationships, or who aren't interested, there comes a sense of loss or aimlessness, as described by many aspec users who have felt difficulty in imagining what their future can hold without the milestones so many have come to take for granted. Not only is that happy ending unfeasible, but often no viable and appealing alternative is presented. Many online commenters expressed dejection and apprehension regarding the unreachable social script with which they've been presented and the notion having to face such an uncertain future:

> In my case, a lot of times I end up being in such a sad mood, of just thinking I'll never experience that kind of love. Media forces romantic attraction down our throats, like "You can be on the verge of suicide, but love will ALWAYS help. Your entire life will get better with love! But only romantic love!" It [makes] me sad, just to think I'll never have a first date, wedding, and all that stuff. (super_bizarra on Reddit)

> I worry about housing, stability and providing for myself in the event I get really sick or something. It doesn't bother me too much [that] I'll never be able to adopt a child, but it's kinda disappointing to not even have the option. I worry about safety as an afab person living alone. I trade in all the relationship drama and emotional upkeep for a cat and a nice, quiet house and somehow I'm the one who's crazy in the eyes of the law and the general public. (Cyndrift on Youtube)

> I can't picture a future for myself. I think most people can picture a spouse and maybe kids and a house. I can't picture anything. [...] It's really scary and demoralizing to not be able to imagine yourself getting older and building a life worth living. (happyghostqueen22 on AUREA)

Even for those who do have a particular future in mind that does not include romantic or sexual relationships, all too often there is a strong stigma against being alone, one that has been enforced by countless narratives from the people and media surrounding them.

> It was from [an] early age that I was bombarded on all sides by people (and institutions) telling me what I was supposed to value: romantic relationships, dating, and having kids. If I didn't, I was weird or sad. I would be ridiculed, pitied. But somehow, worse, I would also receive well-meaning, condescending advice that I never asked for. As if people were all supposed to have the same goals in life, and to value the same things. (Layton, 2021)

The idea of someone being thought of as pitiable and worthy of ridicule is one that is deeply entrenched in the media. Even outside of the world of fiction, the notion that a married life is a better life prevails in media such as the news. Politicians who present the image of being in a happy marriage are viewed and depicted more favorably than those who are single (Grose, 2008). Many pundits, especially those on the conservative end of the political spectrum, regularly tout the importance of marriage and advocate for increased legal incentives for heterosexual couples to get married (Olson, 2005). News has even shown willingness to twist or misrepresent facts to ensure that marriage continues to seem more appealing than singlehood; news sources that reported on surveys showing that married people are happier than single people failed to include the fact that divorcees and widows were counted in these surveys as "single" people - when such complications are accounted for, no statistically significant difference is found between those are or have been married, and those who have never married (DePaulo, 2008; Robson, 2021). As author David Robson explains: "Typically, in our matrimaniacal culture, interpretations that make married people look better are favored over others, even when there is no good scientific reason to do so. The marriage-centered point of view is evident not just in the framing of the results, but in the speculations that are offered to account for them."

Plenty of common tropes and character archetypes in the media perpetuate this negative view toward any lifestyle outside of the typical romantic coupledom. Already in this paper the issue of the loser male virgin who just needs to get laid has been discussed. The term "crazy cat lady" immediately conjures an image of a senile spinster,

who has failed to land a husband or have children and thus can only find meaning through pampering her pet cats (Ares, 2016). Characters who would rather focus on their career than pursue romance are “married to the job” and are letting their workaholic nature interfere with the potential to find true happiness through love (Krischer Goodman, 2012). Single women are “dull, unattractive, and outdated” (Campbell, 2018), while single men who live alone as they grow older are characterized as potential serial killers or pedophiles (Campbell, 2018). All in all, it seems that in the media, a committed romantic relationship is the only life trajectory that provides a happy ending; any other lifestyle is a punishment for failing to find that one true love.

Fighting amatonormativity means allowing alternatives to Relationship Escalator. Especially among the queer community, efforts have been made to push for the normalization of relationships and lifestyles that do not conform to typical labels and structures of monogamous romantic relationships. The concept of relationship anarchy in queer communities - defined by (De las Heras Gómez, 2019) as “a redistribution of the physical, sexual, and emotional intimacy depending on the particular desires and needs from those involved in establishing their own affective bonds” - allows people to explore other relationship models and new definitions based on personal preferences for long-term bonds, and gives way to establishing possibilities for other lifestyles such as those involving polyamory, platonic-cohabitation, or queerplatonic partnerships (Vares, 2019).

But while such ideas may be present within the queer community, examples of such lifestyles are rare to non-existent in the media. Those who are not heavily enough involved in queer communities may very well not have the ability to express or pursue the sort of lifestyle they desire, or even be aware that alternatives to allonormative marriage exist. P.E. described the difficulty that this lack of media representation created for defining the sort of future she wants for herself:

> It would be great if there were more media in the world for people like me, with relationships that look like how I envision my future. There aren't a lot of movies that portray, like, queerplatonic polycoms, co-raising kids. It can sometimes be very difficult to explain to people how I envision my future life, because there's no media touchstone. Like if I were straight, or even if I were gay, then it would be very easy to point to a fictional couple and be like, okay, like this relationship. This looks like what I want. But there aren't very many pieces of media that are like, you know, they're all best friends, and they live on the same city block, and they all kind of raise the same set of kids.

Bernard, too, remarked on the potential for mass media to provide stories that show these alternative life options as happy endings, and how media could help remove the stigma from singleness:

> There's the possibility for one to find meaning in life through avenues outside of marriage and having children. And a really great and convenient way to put those ideas out there is through the media which normalizes those ideas, to show people having, you know, happy successful lives outside of that mold, that just because someone lives an asexual life does not mean that there's something wrong with them. Having those kinds of messages out in society through the media, younger people could see that and realize there are many more avenues that they can pursue that aren't just, you know, go to college, find a spouse of the opposite sex, get married, have kids, get a job. That’s not the only way to find happiness.

Like so many aspects of the aspec experience, a lack of visibility forms the root of this alienation from an amatonormative world. It is much harder to plan for a future for oneself if the possibility of a future that seems desirable has never been presented. This seemed to be the most common thread between the posts and interviews I analyzed for this paper: it’s hard enough to reconcile and embrace one’s own aspec identity when the image of asexuality and aromanticism that has been presented is negative, but it can be even harder when no image is presented at all.

Invisibility

Within the communities observed in this study, there is some debate over which is more harmful to asexual and aromantic media consumers: bad representation, or no representation? A case certainly can be, and has been, made for either side. Take, for

instance, the *House* episode discussed elsewhere in this paper. As commenters on David J. Bradley's video on the episode pointed out, after "Better Half" aired, the Wikipedia article on asexuality saw a massive jump in page views, from about four thousand before the episode, to about fifty thousand within days of the episode airing. On the one hand, this meant that a huge number of new people had just learned the term "asexual" and were looking to learn more about this orientation. On the other, this jump also indicated just how many people had just received gross misinformation about asexuality that would likely now color their view of its validity; how many people looked up asexuality in places other than Wikipedia, and what sort of posts they found about - and whether what they found was positive or negative, accurate or misleading - can only be left to speculation. One Reddit user, LolHi113, made the argument:

> We create a lot of our biases through the media that we consume. Every show you watch has only straight characters as the heroes and only gay characters as the villains? If you don't know any better, it's likely you're going to develop a homophobic bias, because gay people have been portrayed to you as the bad guys. Stopping a lot of aphobia[15] before it can start is a key part of positive visibility. It's the exact reason why negative visibility is worse than no visibility

In a study about rising visibility of the transgender community in mainstream media, Berberick (2018) noted that an increase in trans representation in TV and news media coincided with increased hostility toward trans people from outside groups, including an increase of homicides and the rise of public policy debates such as those regarding gendered bathrooms and sports teams. Berberick pointed out two threats posed by the rise in trans narratives in mass media:

1. Media representation can further isolate because, although the representation is of a person from their identity community, they are still not like that person.

[15] Aphobia refers to fear, hatred, or prejudice toward people who are asexual and/or aromantic (Gottardo, 2018). Acephobia refers to prejudice specifically toward asexual people, while arophobia is prejudice specifically toward aromantic people.

2. Heightened visibility can augment existing dangers to the community [...] with the dangers often being part of the obscured narrative.

Part of this phenomenon stemmed from an age-old reasoning for prejudice in any form: a lack of understanding when presented with a new concept, which can lead to fear and anger. With trans narratives given a new spotlight, people previously unaware or willfully ignorant of transgender people perceive their presence as a threat, a disruption of what had previously been a black-and-white binary view of a common but deceptively complex concept. Another part, though, stems from misinformation. While increasingly in recent years media writers and producers have proven to be making more of an effort to present marginalized communities in an accurate manner, missteps and misinterpretations can plague the narrative. Characters can fall unintentionally into stereotypes; a narrative focus on medical transitioning or mental health of a trans character can pathologize them or paint them as a disparate other to their cisgender counterparts. That is not even accounting for deliberate disinformation: Barnhurt's 2007 study on queer visibility addresses the politicization of queer identities in news media, particularly from Republican sources, that characterizes a rise in queer rights in a distinctly negative light so that, when campaigning to fight against them, they give the voting populace an enemy to fight and a goal that the politicians vow to complete. As Barnhurst puts it: "Visibility of the sort the Republican Party has engineered transforms queer culture and identity into a fearful beast that looms but is easy to vanquish." Anthropologist Susan Seizer coined the term "visibility paradox" to describe this phenomenon of visibility and hostility coinciding, upon her own experience of coming to terms with the fact that living her life authentically as a lesbian amongst an intolerant community meant being seen as an outsider (Seizer, 1995).

And yet, despite the risks of hostility and misinformation, many in the aspec community still take the opposite side of the debate: they would rather take that risk than

endure the invisibility. After all, the same goes for the queer community at large: although things certainly remain far from perfect, progress has been seen over the last few decades in normalization of queer identities and relationships, and increase in the rights to express them, that would never have been possible without queer people making themselves, their experiences, and their needs known.

Even *House* can lay its claim to progress in the community in that sense. Those Wikipedia pageviews are not meaningless. Some commenters stated about the episode that while they certainly don't like that their first exposure to the term "asexual" was tied to something so negative and dismissive of the identity, the fact remained that this was their *first* exposure. And having even that gave them a starting point to look more deeply into the identity, correct the misinformation the episode gave, and find that the label struck a chord. Youtube user thefrozen combustion commented that "As harmful as this episode was, it was the first time I had ever heard of asexuality and I remember being a teenager pausing the episode to Google it and instantly realizing that it was me. I mean it was bad, but it led me to AVEN and let me know that I wasn't broken." According to another user, Théo Bazeille-Parey: "For what it's worth I watched this when I was like 11 or 12 yo and first heard about asexuality in the episode. Yet I instantly thought about it as valid."

And that's just in regards to infamous misrepresentation. The prospect of having access to more positive visibility, visibility that does not paint asexuality and aromanticism as problems or failures or jokes but as natural and valid identities, makes any type of visibility at all that much more enticing. When the media is so deeply infused with sex and romance, any deviation at all feels infinitely more relatable.

Paige, in her interview, said that, "I feel like we're just so starved for representation that we'll just take whatever we can get." And many commenters seemed to agree. Even when aspec representation comes in the form of a character who is

inhuman or evil, many find themselves latching onto whatever scraps they can get their hands on. Interviewee Rick echoed the sentiment: “I think the first character I ever heard of being asexual was Psycho Mantis, from *Metal Gear Solid* [16]. And that’s definitely not good representation. Like, this is a depraved maniac who has murdered thousands of people. That’s a horrible role model. But, you know, he was an asexual character, in a game that I loved. So I just was like, fuck it. He’s my favorite now.”

It is certainly understandable how any semblance of representation can be so encouraging, especially considering the alternative. The online community was near universally in agreement regarding the difficulty that comes from invisibility:

> Honestly being asexual is so hard sometimes. It feels like the entire world is in on some joke you just don’t get. You’re surrounded by media talking about sparks and uncontrollable desire and all the rest of it and you just keep waiting for the punch line because either everyone must be lying and exaggerating or you’re missing something which everyone says is a vital part of their lives and the be all or end all and you just feel confused and empty. (beaisbetter on Tumblr)
>
> I think I can safely say that the lack of explicit aromantic representation harms all of us, but arospec people are the most affected. Because not only does it take us ages to find out about aromanticism and explore the label, we then also have to do all the work of educating people, including friends, potential partners, family members, and healthcare professionals. (aceofarrows on Tumblr)
>
> i feel like the number of people who are asexual and/or aromantic is way bigger than the number of people who actually identify as ace/aro. so many people haven’t even heard of asexuality or aromanticism, and so few people actually understand what they mean. i wonder how many people out there have just been convincing themselves they’re attracted to people because they think they have to be. or how many people have quietly avoided relationships all their lives, not knowing there’s a word for a lack of attraction and a whole community of people like them. (asexual-musings on Tumblr)
>
> I spent *decades* thinking I was broken and trying to fix myself. I was so frustrated that everything I tried, nothing worked. I would have been saved a lot of heartache if there was some representation (Reb_1_2_3 on Reddit)

[16] *Metal Gear Solid* is a stealth video game franchise released on the Playstation which began in 1998; Psycho Mantis is a psychic member of an elite black ops unit of the United States Army.

Although there have been more aspec characters in the media in the past decade than there had been in the past, it still lags far behind in terms of representation that is proportionate to the population. The most widely cited statistic suggest that 1% of people are asexual (Wellings, 1994), but that figure comes from a survey nearly three decades out of date; more recent surveys estimate that figure to be as high as 4% (Green & Tzeses, 2021). Either way, that proportion is not reflected in mainstream media. In GLAAD's 2022 analysis of queer representation on TV, out of 779 characters in primetime series, 2 of them, about 0.26%, were asexual, and none were aromantic.

Even in media that is otherwise progressive in its representation of queer identities tends to leave the aspec community in the dust. A great deal of queer media falls into the romance genre, where amatonormative notions run as rampant as they do in media focused on straight couples. Dating, marriage, and loss of virginity are treated as essential milestones, and first crushes are a fundamental part of the narrative of queer self-discovery. Aspecs even still remain the butt of mockery in queer media - one Tumblr discussion started by user allonsythornraxx pointed to *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* as an example. The series received wide acclaim for its depiction of a gay main character and for its excellent handling of a coming-out arc for another main character discovering her bisexuality. Yet the series is packed full of virgin-shaming jokes, and in one episode[17], a protagonist character even uses the term 'asexual' as an insult, when she refers to two other characters as "a couple of asexual nerds who could only be friends with service dogs."

While asexual and aromantic people firmly belong in the queer community as much as any other minority sexual or romantic orientation, often there seems to be something of a disconnect because aspecs and their allo counterparts within queer

[17] Season 2, Episode 18: "Captain Peralta"

spaces. The emphasis placed on sex and romance as the core of the queer experience, and campaigns centered around concepts such as “Love Wins”[18] are alienating to many aspecs - not to mention overlooking the importance of transgender and intersex rights that the queer community champions (Nadal, 2019). At its worse, this can manifest in toxic infighting and fragmentation in queer spaces. Aspec people have found themselves barred from access to resources and support that they need due to these gatekeeping practices (Meyer, 2019), and the targets of hate campaigns and psychological abuse from “ace exclusionists” within the queer community (Barbeau et al., 2022), leaving many with long-term trauma (Lang, 2018).

At its most innocuous, it means that aromantic and asexual community members are forgotten in the creation of queer media, their identities unintentionally invalidated. Chantal, for example, relayed her experience watching Sense8, a fantasy Netflix series centered around queer characters around the world with a psychic link to one another:

> It was an early Netflix show and it was a big deal that it's like, oh, it's really gay. There's all this LGBT representation, and LGBT love is a core feature of the show. And then it just would have these weird little asides about how it's like, it's through sex, that these characters are able to really connect with each other. And just I can't stand that because now I can't be a cool magic person, in these scenarios. So now I'm outside of this true connection idea. Like, oh, a relationship isn't a full relationship with these characters until there’s sex.

Erasure

On those rare occasions in which asexuality or aromanticism is acknowledged or even incorporated into stories, aspecs still have to be wary of that representation being actively erased later on. The case of *House* is, of course, a stark example of representation being promised and then snatched away over the course of a single

[18] The phrase began as a Twitter hashtag celebrating the national legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S., and became a slogan for the queer community particularly common on merchandise (Rasmussen, 2021)

episode. Other series have teased asexual representation for much longer before backtracking.

The BBC series *Sherlock*, a modern adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories, garnered a negative reputation amongst asexual viewers (Khurana, 2021) for bouncing around on the matter of the titular character's orientation. Sherlock's sexuality has been asked about in numerous behind-the-scenes interviews with the cast and crew, and his asexuality has been both confirmed and disproven. Showrunner Steven Moffat stated in one interview that, "[Sherlock]'s not interested in sex. [...] He's not gay. He's not straight" (Fitz-Gerald, 2015). But in another, he asserted that, "If he was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that" (Jeffries, 2012). Benedict Cumberbatch, the actor who plays Sherlock Holmes, stated outright in an interview that, "He's asexual" (Yuan, 2014) - only to then proceed to demonstrate a misunderstanding of the label that makes it clear he had conflated asexuality with celibacy: "He doesn't want any, and it's very purposeful on his part. I think he's been burnt in the past. I think he also realizes he can't beat female intuition; he can't. So to embroil himself where he might be enslaved through adoration or sexual desire or any kind of power or chemistry to do with love is too big a risk for him" (Yuan, 2014).

AMC's *The Walking Dead* misled the asexual community in a similar manner. Writer and executive producer Robert Kirkman stated in an interview that lead character Daryl Dixon was straight, in response to rumors about the character being gay, but added that, "We play Daryl Dixon as being somewhat asexual on the show" (Bricker, 2014) - leading to a common interpretation of him being homoromantic asexual, a reading enforced by the character's lack of sexual partners throughout the series' run. Actor Norman Reedus even confirmed years later that he views the character as asexual, and has received fan mail from asexual viewers thanking him for providing representation for the community (Akuna, 2019). This led to surprise and disappointment

(Ngimbi, 2022) when, in the show's final season, Daryl was suddenly embroiled in a love arc with another character, Leah, in a rushed plot - admitted as such by the cast - that negated the character's asexuality (Ngimbi, 2022), which had never been confirmed in the series itself.

Other instances of aspec erasure are even more blatant, with characters who were canonically[19] confirmed and shown to be asexual and aromantic being actively changed to be allo instead. Perhaps the most infamous example is the case of Jughead Jones in *Riverdale*. The character had long been portrayed as being uninterested in romance and sex, and the 2015 run of Archie Comics confirmed in the comics' dialogue and plotlines that Jughead identified as asexual and aromantic. However, when Archie Comics were adapted into the 2017 CW series *Riverdale*, showrunner Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa decided not to make Jughead aroace. Rather, Jughead became another heterosexual, heteroromantic character among many, with multiple romantic and sexual plotlines with female characters. Asexual comic fans were outraged, and launched an effort on social media to get the *Riverdale* showrunners to change their plans for the character and give that representation back to the community (Alexander, 2017), to no avail. Actor Cole Sprouse had initially positioned himself as an ally to the aspec community, promising to fight for asexuality to be included in Jughead's characterization (Alexander, 2017), only to later backtrack, declaring that erasing Jughead's aroace identity was an informed decision to "update" the character (Revanche, 2017). The straightwashing[20] of Jughead was the most common example of aspec erasure pointed to when collecting data for this paper, and plenty of ace and aro commenters have lent their voice to the issue:

[19] "Canon" in fandom terms refers to material accepted as official and authoritative parts of the source material

[20] "Straightwashing" refers to any instance in which a character's established queer sexual/romantic orientation is altered to instead make them heterosexual-heteroromantic.

> I GET why they don't want to have him be asexual - but I think it's incredibly stupid, especially when asexuality clearly needs more exposure - and more reinforcement that being asexual IS NOT BAD. It's not weird, or wrong, or stupid, or, "You just haven't found the right person." No. It's just another sexuality (or lack thereof), and it shouldn't be judged any differently. (Kevinw778 on Reddit)
>
> It's frustrating because there really need to be some openly asexual characters on tv. Especially for shows like this where they might help teens come to terms with their sexuality and not feel alone or broken like I did due to not knowing asexuality exists. (urbanwolf on Reddit)
>
> I am so tired of having to fight for what little representation we already have. We don't even have time to ask for more representation. The very little we already have keeps being taken away. Regardless of how that information was confirmed, making aromantic characters alloromantic or asexual characters allosexual is erasure. I'm tired of fighting people trying to justify why this erasure is ok. (mikaylamic on Twitter)

And while the erasure of Jughead's asexuality and aromanticism is the most prominent example of aspec erasure in media, it's far from the only one.

One frequently overlooked case of erasure, for instance, comes from *Shadowhunters*, a television adaptation of the book series *The Shadowhunter Chronicles*. The show presented its audience with an asexual character in the form of Raphael Santiago, former head of the Brooklyn vampire clan. He states outright that he has no interest in sexual relationships, making him a rare case of canonical confirmation of asexuality. He develops a romantic relationship with Isabelle, one of the series' main characters, demonstrating himself to still be a warm and caring person. By all means, this representation should be a win for the aspec community - were it not for the fact that, in the books on which the TV show is based, Raphael is aroace. His asexuality was maintained in the adaptation, but his aromanticism was erased to instead bring in a love story. Visibility in media for asexuality is severely lacking, but for aromanticism, it's practically non-existent, thus the backlash against the erasure wasn't nearly as visible either. But that doesn't mean it wasn't there, and that aromantic viewers weren't hurt, as comments on Tumblr and Blogger attest:

> Raphael Santiago was aromantic asexual, not…alloromantic asexual. In the books, I mean. We aromantics have been saying this ever since this character got confirmed as allo ace in the tv show, but aromantic erasure doesn't seem to bother any of you so, I'm going to keep on saying it (saltyaro on Tumblr)
>
> What is it about aromanticism that makes showrunners pretend we don't exist and fellow aces turn their faces when we say we do? What's so bad about saying no to love that an aromantic asexual character is allowed to say he doesn't like sex on TV, but not to say he doesn't like romance? What is the difference? Why is it here where everyone draws the line? Why is it okay to not feel sexual attraction in this case, but not okay to not feel romantic attraction? (blogger angryelves)
>
> I want to point out that in the books, Raphael Santiago was asexual and aromantic, but they erased his aromanticism in Shadowhunters. So maybe instead of holding up the show as a great example of queer representation, we can also talk about how it badly it failed to represent one of the most invisible queer communities? (raavenb2619 on Tumblr)

In some cases, an aspec character may not have their aspec identity erased, but rather their orientation is presented ambiguously enough that audiences can carry out that erasure for them. A prime example of this sort of erasure came about in 2020, regarding the titular character of Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Creator and showrunner Stephen Hillenburg, when asked in an interview about SpongeBob's orientation, stated that the character was asexual (Beatty, 2002), and had instructed the show's writing staff that SpongeBob should never be given a love interest or romantic relationship (Waller, 2016).

As a Pride Month tribute, in June of 2020 Nickelodeon's official Twitter account tweeted out a post featuring images of queer characters from their TV lineup edited with a rainbow filter: Korra, a bisexual character from the cartoon *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*; Schwoz Schwartz, a transgender man from the sitcom *Henry Danger*; and SpongeBob Squarepants. And while many in the asexual community knew and pointed out that this was not a big revelation, as Spongebob had been confirmed asexual well

over a decade ago, many others were shocked and delighted that SpongeBob was now canonically confirmed as… gay.

The tweet did not specify the orientations of any of the featured characters. While Korra and Schwoz both had their queer identities confirmed in their respective shows, SpongeBob's asexuality was only canonized behind the scenes, and was a piece of trivia that was practically unknown outside of the ace community - even within it, many weren't aware of the confirmation. So when presented only the confirmation that he was "LGBTQ+", the general assumption was that he was gay, an orientation much better-known that asexual. "SpongeBob Gay" began trending on Twitter (Thomas, 2020), and sites such as CNN (France, 2020) and Buzzfeed (Galindo, 2020) ran pieces about the character being confirmed gay. Aces who had long embraced SpongeBob as an asexual icon (Smith, 2020) made a valiant effort to combat the misinformation, but found themselves drowned out or met with dismissal (Scott, 2020) or even hostility (Olusola, 2021). In discussions observed for this paper, ace fans made their displeasure clear:

> It's still so frustrating that no one seems to understand that there's more to the LGBTQ community than just "gay." Both the lack of representation and the lack of nuance is incredibly annoying. (That-Brain-Nerd on Reddit)
>
> Aces are tired of being erased. We don't get much media representation. So yeah, it's a cartoon, but if your qualm with "Spongebob is asexual" is the asexual part, not "Spongebob is LGBTQ+", trust me, we notice. Aces ARE LGBTQ+. Let us have this. #pride (@secretladyspider on Twitter)
>
> Another instance of using lgbtq or the rainbow flag and forgetting mspec or aspec people all together. And fuck buzzfeed man, they could've just googled, given us exposure, and avoided a possible 'aces stole spongebob' fiasco to come (fuckyeahasexual on Tumblr)

V, in her interview, stated of the erasure of asexual and aromantic characters such as SpongeBob and Jughead that "It feels like a voice was taken away from us."

Audience and Fandom

As the asexual erasure that occurred after the SpongeBob tweet demonstrates, fans and audience members can often play a significant role in the dissemination of ideas relating to sex and romance, relationship norms, and perceptions of aspec identities within the context of media. Depending on how deeply one is involved in fan communities and spaces, the audience can even play a larger role in forming these ideas than the media's canon. For aspec media consumers, that connection to fan spaces exists on a wide scale. Even amongst the sampling of those I interviewed, fandom experience ranged from sharing discussions of media only with a few offline friends, to hosting fandom events for the creation of new derivative content for a favorite series. The levels of positivity and acceptance toward aspec narratives, identities, and community members also varied widely; interview participants and online discussions showed a great deal of diversity in regard to fandom experience.

On one end of this range, an aspec identity could have a profound negative impact on one's experience of fandom culture. This is particularly true for those who are sex-repulsed or romance-repulsed in regard to viewing or consuming media content. As a whole, fandom spaces and fan content, while historically being much more inclusive to same-gender couples than the canon counterparts on which they are based (Lothian, 2017), are just as prone to amatonormative ideas as mass media, possibly even more so. Fan culture is often dominated by "shipping" - the act of pairing characters together romantically and/or sexually (Klink, 2019) - and the vast majority of fan fiction available in online fan communities falls under the genre of romance or erotica, regardless of how heavy the themes of romance or sex were in the media they are based upon. As is the case for those canon media, many aspec fans expressed how the prevalence of sex and romance in fandom spaces negatively impact their fan experience.

> It is not uncommon for a lot of fanfic and fan art to be graphically sexual in nature, leaving people like me unable to engage in most fandom circles as fully as many other fans do. This is something that I feel other fans sometimes take for granted. The ability to scroll through Tumblr or another fandom-heavy social media site free of the anxiety that someone will neglect to tag some smutty art, for example, is a luxury many fans have that I do not. (blogger theasexualgeek)
>
> I'm sure it's not news to anyone that fandom (fanfic especially) is amatonormative as fuck. It's not even that there's a lot of hate for aro people anything. It's just that there's no real place for you if you have no interest in shipping [...] Like, okay, there are some fics that aren't about ships. But depending on the fandom, they can be pretty friggin rare. Shipping is so major that it's even baked into ao3's[21] search system (E-is-for-Egg on Reddit)

Although the terminology may be different in fan spaces, the emphasis on romance and sex isn't new, as all this paper's previous discussion of amatonormativity in mass media illustrates. But the nature of fanwork differs greatly from mass media in myriad ways, primarily when it comes to creative freedom. For one thing, fanfiction is not bound by restrictions of length the way TV series and films are - works can range from one hundred words to over a million. A writer can fill their work by purely focusing on the romantic or sexual relationship between characters in a way that mass media can't, as it does not need to fill a time frame or conform to narrative requirements such as character conflict or a plot arc. Additionally, fanfiction by its nature is self-indulgent, with creators writing purely what they want to see the characters do, rather than having to adhere to what a wider audience or advertisers want, what is acceptable within the canon work's content rating, or even whether what they want makes sense with the established characters and world. While this can be a good way for fans to be able to add representation for minority identities into fandoms that did not previously have any, it also becomes just as easy for representation to be erased if it is not to a fandom's taste. And as aromantic and asexual identities often stand in the way of fan-favorite romantic

[21] AO3 is an abbreviation for Archive Of Our Own, a popular website that hosts user-created fanfiction.

and sexual pairings, what little canon representation there is in mass media is frequently sidelined in fan spaces.

Two prominent examples of this erasure in fandom spaces that I saw multiple commenters reference were *Steven Universe*'s Peridot and *Hazbin Hotel*'s Alastor. Both of these characters were confirmed to be aroace through Twitter posts made by crew members of their respective shows (Peterson, 2020; Medrano 2018), but their orientations had been hinted at in their series' canon. Peridot was shown to be uncomfortable "fusing" with others - a technique performed by gems[22] in which two or more merge their bodies together into a new individual who embodies the sum of each of their parts. A gag in *Hazbin Hotel*'s web series pilot has Alastor be shocked and horrified by an offer of sexual favors, then proceed to quickly laugh off and reject the offer.

In some cases, the erasure of these characters' identities came in the form of people simply not knowing their canonical orientation. Although many fans who are involved enough in their communities to create fan content often follow social media surrounding their fandom, this is not universally the case, and even those who do follow such media don't note every piece of trivia. Arodabi on Tumblr posted their frustration with this in regard to Peridot: "Every time i post offhandedly about peridot from Steven universe being canonically aroace, i still have aspec ppl every time comment about how they never knew she was canonically aro bc the entire fandom continues to deny and erase her canon identity."

It is certainly undeniable, too, that the erasure isn't always unintentional, and even show creators seem to realize how highly romance is prioritized in fan spaces. In her tweet confirming Peridot's orientation, writer Maya Peterson noted that: "I don't want

[22] Members of the alien species in *Steven Universe* are based on various gemstones and referred to as gems

to make that representation a secondary priority to shipping anymore." Faustisse, a visual developer for *Hazbin Hotel*, discussed in a live stream that the series' showrunners had been extremely hesitant to confirm Alastor's orientation for fear of the backlash they would receive from fans. Aspec fans looking to feel welcomed into fan communities have expressed exasperation with the fact that Peterson's and Faustisse's reservations were far from unfounded:

> I know that not all aroaces are romance/sex repulsed, but it's just so frustrating to me that *every time* a character is canonically ace or aro, the conversation immediately becomes about all of the reasons it's okay to ship them or write smut about them. [...] It would be cool if for once a character could come out as aroace and people just decided to focus on shipping any of the millions of allo characters out there rather than trying to justify why this ship isn't problematic. (F3ltrix on Reddit)

> I'm tired of it. There are enough of other characters out there for you to ship. I can literally count on one hand how many characters are canonically ace/aro/aroace. (I literally know of two that I'm sure of). So, please stop bringing up how asexuality and aromanticism exist on a spectrum when the only reason you are bringing it up is to defend erasure. (hellishunicorn on Tumblr)

> I've been in fandom a long time and there's something very common I've seen amongst the allormantics within the fandom and that is wilfully ignoring that a character is canonically aromantic. (blogger acelauren)

Aspec fans in this study also discussed problems faced when participating in another major facet of fan culture: headcanons, defined as "ideas held by fans of series that are not explicitly supported by sanctioned text or other media" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Especially in online spaces populated primarily by queer userbases, such as Tumblr (Cavalcante, 2020), it is common for fans to have headcanons of their favorite characters' sexual orientation, and these headcanons influence other fan work and frequently permeate online discussions of the media in question. Online posts and interviewees alike have faced backlash for engaging in headcanons that interpret characters as asexual or aromantic, often going against more popular allosexual

headcanons in the fandom. In discussing this fan experience, blogger theasexualgeek described:

> Sometimes other fans will get openly hostile and aphobic towards ace fans when they attempt to headcanon a character as aspec. I have seen these moments firsthand in everything from the Dragon Age fandom to the Disney fandom, and they often leave me with the sense that not only are our ideas as aspec people not welcome, but that we ourselves aren't welcome either.

Paige, in her interview, talked about being perceived as "the bad guy" for having ace and aro headcanons, particularly for characters whom other fans interpret as gay - numerous Tumblr commenters mention being perceived as homophobic for not sharing allo gay headcanons that are popular with other fans, especially when such headcanons fuel a fan-favorite ship. Interviewee Anna stated that, in her experience in the online *Sherlock* fandom, "If you dare mention anywhere in a 10-foot proximity of a *Sherlock* fan that you think that Sherlock is aromantic, that you think that he and John have a platonic relationship, they will accuse you of being homophobic and they will yell at you and they will talk about how it's so ridiculous how much you want to have platonic relationships on screen."

Other interview participants shared the experience as well: Rick described how, when a fictional character is not given a love interest in canon, "it's like they're throwing scraps of potential representation, and making the aroace fans and the gay fans fight each other for it." Kay provided the example of Elsa in Disney's *Frozen* franchise. Aroace Elsa has become an extremely popular headcanon among ace and aro fans of the films (Rose, 2020), particularly after the release of *Frozen II* in 2019, in which the character expresses annoyance with her sister for insisting on playing out a romantic plot with their dolls in a flashback to the characters' childhood, spending the film searching for the source of a voice that Elsa believes is calling out to her to lead her on a journey of self-discovery, which ends up involving her realizing her happiness in

independence, complete with the lyrics[23]: “You are the one you’ve been waiting for all of your life.” Other fans mainstream platforms, too, picked up the queer subtext of Elsa’s character arc and similarities between her development and a coming-out story, but for many allo fans, this meant Elsa must be a lesbian (Hitchen, 2022). Fans experienced infighting in online spaces, and a vocal portion of the fanbase demanded between the two films that Elsa be given a girlfriend in the sequel (Gramuglia, 2019); the lack of one led to accusations of queerbaiting[24] (once again, demonstrating the sidelining and erasure of aces and aros within the queer community).

Aspec fans are in general agreement of exhaustion with the idea that aspec interpretations of characters are lesser-than within fan communities, or that ace and aro representation in both canon and fanon[25] should be deprioritized in favor of allo identities, and this case is a stark illustration of this phenomenon:

> it seems to be a common assumption that lacking a partner of the opposite sex = automatically homosexual. It's a really annoying one, at that… (Vee. on AVEN)
>
> I’ve seen so many characters that I’ve perked up at, thinking they’re asexual, but then theyre thrown into a relationship/one nights stand or otherwise to make it seem more ‘normal’ PLEASE, you guys can have the next princess / queen we promise. CAN WE ASEXUALS PLEASE HAVE OUR ICE QUEEN? (the-mad-march-hare42 on Tumblr)
>
> Elsa fans who believed she was ace, much like Merida fans who believed she was ace, were harassed, bullied, and basically told that they were homophobic/lesbophobic/anti-LGBT by Disney fans [...] I doubt the headcanon she’s ace/aro is unpopular now, it’s just that nobody wants to get screamed at so we’ve all stopped saying it. (khrysoprase on Tumblr)

[23] From the song “Show Yourself”, sung by Elsa and her mother

[24] A marketing technique in which queer representation is hinted at or teased in order to attract a queer audience, but is not actually included within the work (Ritschel, 2019)

[25] Ideas and elements about a piece of media that are commonly accepted among fans despite not being expressed in the canon work

A Space for Aspec Fans

Still, while there is certainly an ongoing problem of ace and aro voices being drowned out within fandom spaces, those voices are still there and can sometimes carve out welcoming a place within fan communities. Thus, not all aspec fandom experiences are negative. In fact, fan spaces can give aspec consumers an alternative channel for representation within fan works, a place to voice criticisms and aspec interpretations of media among other audience members, and opportunities to find others looking for the same fan experience as themselves.

In those instances when media provides canonically aspec characters that are well-received, fans are able to come together in appreciation and expansion of that rare representation. For as much as characters such as Peridot and Alastor have their identities erased in fan spaces, aspec content creators frequently take up the task of creating work that respects and highlights their aromanticism and asexuality. And some fandoms have less of a problem with erasure than others. In interviews, both Anna and Chantal pointed to positive experiences they've had within the online fan community for the horror podcast *The Magnus Archives*, the main character of which was confirmed during the show's run to be asexual. The show's fans, on the whole, were accepting of this revelation, and maintained that element of the character in derivative works. Chantal remarked that this podcast "seemed to bring a lot of ace writers out of the woodwork", and thus led to a large amount of ace-inclusive fan content that allowed validation and education about asexuality to thrive within the fandom. Reddit user tatemiau, in a thread about media representation, even pointed to this fandom as identity-defining, stating that: "Jonathan Sims from the magnus archives being canonically ace and the fanfiction written off of it and the ways people talked about and portrayed asexuality made me realize I was ace!"

Aspec presence in fandom is not, of course, limited only to canon aspec representation. While asexual and aromantic headcanons may not be as widely accepted by fandoms at large as allo headcanons, or platonic interpretations of character relationships as popular, those fans who see potential for themselves to be reflected in their favorite characters and stories have worked to make these interpretations visible. On Tumblr, greed-the-dorkalicious describes the confidence that understanding their aro identity gave them to take control of their view of fanon:

> It wasn't until I realized that I'm aromantic- aka when I stopped looking at the world, and myself, through a lens of romance as the end-all-be-all- that I realized that I… Didn't have to do that. That these characters didn't have to be shipped. After that, my opinions on a lot of ships gradually went from "This is my OTP and they're clearly in love!" to "Idc if it's romantic or platonic, I just love seeing these two together!" to "I don't ship these two, but if you do, great!" to "You know what? These two have a great friendship and that's perfect." Not because I felt pressure not to ship them, not because I never liked the ships at all, but simply because I realized they didn't need to be shipped.

Tumblr user corelliaxdreaming, too, found fandom to be a beneficial space to provide the representation that mainstream media would not:

> I used to look at people's aspec headcanons with a respectful "you can headcanon whatever you want, but I personally don't see it." And oh boy did that ever change when it was suddenly personal! Now it's "all my faves are ace, and allo people can't do anything about it!" There's not a lot of rep out there, so I really enjoy getting to provide some of that, as well as it just generally being something I enjoy exploring through my writing. It's always been a way of exploring things for me, and this is no different.

Some characters and media are particularly popular among aspec viewers, and the prevalence of aspec presence in these fandoms can be a positive source of visibility. Two of this study's interviewees cite fan headcanons as being their first encounters with the terms for these identities. Kay first learned of the term asexual through the *Sherlock* fandom; despite its mishandling of the character's orientation in canon, many *Sherlock* fans continue to interpret the title character as being asexual, aromantic, or both. For P.E., it was the *Supernatural* fandom. A good deal of fans interpret the character Castiel

as asexual, and before he had a canonical orientation established in the show proper[26], many also viewed him as aromantic, and during the years of the show's run, a sizeable catalog of fanfiction and edits highlighting these aspec identities was established by the fandom.

Other interview participants, too, were able to get representation through fandom in a way they hadn't through mainstream media. Rick has dipped his fingers into writing fanfiction in order to fill a void for platonic content that he felt his fandom needed, and Anna has even run an online writing event for writers to exchange stories about aromantic characters. Bre described finding a sense of belonging through the world of fanfiction:

> That's actually one way that I was able to understand myself much better, was by someone writing fanfiction. Saying, I'm headcanoning that this person is asexual, and here's their experience in this romantic relationship with this person. For the first time, I just remember reading it, and being like, it can be like that. I didn't realize that that is another possibility of the asexual experience and got very excited. There have been lots of situations of people putting themselves in the story through their ace experience. This is what I'm here for, I can finally be seen in this media, like, this is exactly my experience.

Positive Aspec Media Experiences

Fanfiction is, fortunately, not the only avenue through which aspec consumers can find positive representation in media, although for the majority of consumers, that media representation does not come from mainstream media such as film and television. Instead, most of the representation that commenters and interviewees enjoyed and that contributed positively to their knowledge and acceptance of their orientation came from smaller media. Some of this is through books. For instance, Alice Oseman's 2020 novel *Loveless* was praised widely online by aspec readers for its depiction of an aroace

[26] Supernatural ran for 15 seasons from 2005 to 2020. The finale episode had Castiel, a male angel character introduced in the show's 4th season, confess his love to Dean, another male character, which seemed to establish him as homoromantic; no indication was ever given as to whether this attraction was also sexual.

protagonist discovering her identity; in a Reddit thread regarding aroace representation, user Incarnation101213 pointed to the novel as an important turning point of self-discovery:

> Recently a friend sent me a bunch of messages about a book he was reading called Loveless. It was about an aroace character, and he was sort of freaking out because the way the character described her crushes was the exact same way that he got crushes. I talked with him and, as an aroace person, we had pretty much the same experiences when it came to crushes, so because of that book we were both able to realize and solidify the fact that we are both aroace.

And it's not the only novel that has proven important to aspec readers. A number of books were brought up by interview subjects as examples of positive representation. These include Mackenzi Lee's *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*, Darcie Little Badger's *Elatsoe*, Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love*, Kathryn Ormsbee's *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*, and K.J. Charles' *The Rat-Catcher's Daughter*, all which prominently feature canonically aspec characters.

However, most of the aspec representation that the community has found and celebrated comes in the form of web media. All but one of my interview subjects, when asked where they had first learned about asexuality and/or aromanticism, pointed to online communities. This includes fan spaces and fanfiction, as discussed previously, but also included social media platforms ranging from Instagram to Tumblr to Reddit. Web videos and video series also were seen to provide viewers with their first encounter with asexuality or aromanticism as a concept. Anna first heard the term asexuality in a video from the Youtube channel Overly Sarcastic Productions[27], and Bernard recalls learning about the asexual experience through a TED Talk[28] video. Popular Youtuber

[27] Overly Sarcastic Productions posts animated videos on Youtube discussing history and literature. The videos are hosted by "Red" and "Blue"; Red is asexual, and has brought up asexuality in videos when discussing sex in classical mythology.

[28] TED Conferences, LLC is a media organization that posts speeches and lectures online for free distribution under the slogan "ideas worth spreading".

JaidenAnimations, a story-time animations[29] channel, brought a great deal visibility to the aspec community with her video “Being Not Straight”, in which she came out as aroace to her audience of over ten million subscribers[30]; many commenters remarked that this was their first time learning of the identity, and even credited her with helping them with their own self-discovery. For example, one user, Random Thought, commented: “I'm 18 and I think Jaiden just opened my eyes that I just might be aroace. I'm shook. EVERYTHING Jaiden just said about her feelings was literally how I felt for so much of my life and now I'm literally so shocked that there is more people like me…” and Aury Angus commented: “One of my friends who is aro sent this to me a while ago and now I’ve found out I’m aroace too so thank you cus you helped a lot with finding out”.

Other forms of web media that have also become sources of positive aspec representation include web novels, web comics, and independently published e-books. Narrative podcasts, too, have proven to be a particularly popular medium for creating aspec characters. In addition to the previously mentioned *Magnus Archives*, interview subjects and commenters found relatable aspec characters in a wide range of podcasts including *The Antique Shop, The Penumbra Podcast, Critical Role, Hello from the Hallowoods,* and *Moonbase Theta Out.* In general, users found that web media tends to be much more inclusive to a wide range of queer identities than mainstream media. P.E. attributes this difference to the ease of publishing independent web content and lack of production costs that would leave mainstream media beholden to sponsors and studios, and Anna offered her insight about representation in podcasts thusly:

> What is so wonderful about audio drama is there really are no barriers to creation. If you are a creator in audio drama you are not held accountable to a network, to people thinking about their ratings and advertisers. And there tends to be very heavily queer creators, who might have tried to get into TV or other

[29] Story-time animations consist of the creator narrating stories from their life in the style of a vlog, with accompanying animations and illustrations rather than live-action video footage.
[30] According to Social Blade statistics: https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/jaiden/monthly

> areas and did not get there, and so they can create whatever they want with as many queer characters as they want in their podcast. And it's amazing, and broadly supported by audience, through crowdfunding and Patreon[31]. And so all these queer fans are out here supporting queer shows.

That is not to say, however, that there have been no positive representations of the aspec community at all in mainstream media, just that they are far more rare. Still, when a mainstream example of representation comes along, the size of its impact through audience reach is particularly noticeable. The most prominent example by far of positive mainstream aspec representation comes from the 2014-2020 Netflix animated series *BoJack Horseman*.

BoJack Horseman, a show in which humans and anthropomorphic animals coexist in a cartoon version of Hollywood[32], features as one of its core cast members a human character named Todd Chavez, best friend and roommate of the title character who acts as a moral compass and comic relief throughout the series. His asexuality was introduced to the show's canon during the third season, with multiple episodes displaying his hesitation and aversion toward sex and, in the season finale, having him state that, "I'm not gay, but I don't think I'm straight either. I think I might be nothing." Already this arc was well-received amongst ace fans, but the identity was much further explored in the following season, in which Todd gained the confidence to refer to himself as asexual, began attending ace meet-ups, learned more about terminology within the aspec community, and started to explore a romantic relationship with an asexual partner.

Todd's coming-out arc received nearly universal praise from ace viewers (Kliegman, 2018), and garnered attention for asexuality from online news, TV reviews, and popular blogging and opinion sites. Articles from queer online presses praised the

[31] Patreon is an online platform that allows users to buy paid monthly subscriptions to financially support small content creators, in exchange for perks such as bonus material or early access to content.
[32] Referred to as Hollywoo, due to an in-universe theft of the letter D from the famous Hollywood sign in the show's first season.

care put into the depiction of an asexual character, with the ace authors of these articles finding an unsurpassed relatability in this arc: “BoJack depicts the unique ways in which marginalized people are forced to contend with a world that often doesn’t feel designed for us” (Cuby, 2018); “There is just so much nuanced and complex self-actualization going on with this character that hits the nail on the head on what my experience has been like” (Morgan, 2017); “This representation isn't going unnoticed, and Ace people are praising the series for doing something many shows haven't dared before: show an asexual person just...existing” (Henderson, 2017). Special praise was given for the research put into the depiction: the show’s writers had consulted AVEN and Ace LA, a real-life asexual meet-up group in Los Angeles, when planning the storyline (Astarlia, 2017), and a later season introduces an asexual character, who becomes Todd’s long-term girlfriend, played by an acespec voice actress[33] (Belcher, 2020).

When conducting research for this paper, Todd Chavez was brought up in nearly every forum thread relating to ace representation in the media that I could find, as well as in subject interviews. Even in posts about negative media experiences, such as the video essay on *House* and blog posts regarding *Riverdale*, commenters pointed to *BoJack Horseman* as an example of media “doing it right”. All in all, the online response to the representation and its impact was clear:

> Bojack Horseman is a huge part of me discovering that I'm asexual. Without Todd, it's highly likely i would not have properly discovered what i am. I will always be thankful for Bojack Horseman for that. (Captainmarvel87 on Youtube)
>
> My wife recently came to terms with being ace. Todd's coming out was actually something that helped her not only come to terms with this fact, but [...] really helped illustrate the fact that she wasn't alone. She recently went to her first asexual meetup and she said Todd has become a very important figure in the community. This show has done wonders for bringing asexuality to light for people who would otherwise really have no idea what being ace is about.

[33] Echo Gillette, best known as a Youtuber and artist, identifies as gray-asexual.

> Granted it just scratched the surface, but already it's done so much! (Channelten on Reddit)
>
> I'm slowing working on the article about when I got to tell Aaron Paul to his face that his role on BoJack Horseman helped me realise that I'm #asexual and changed my life. (@CorissaBaker on Twitter)

BoJack Horseman certainly provides the most prominent example of asexual representation on television, but a few other programs have managed to give the ace community a voice – although, canonical aromantic representation still remains scarce. Sirens, a comedy TV series following the work lives of EMTs that ran for two seasons on the cable network USA beginning in 2014, featured an asexual recurring character in Valentina "Voodoo" Dunacci. Some ace viewers, such as interviewee Bernard, found validation in her identity and use of the asexual label, although the brevity of her arc and the relative obscurity of the series prevented it from having the same mainstream impact as *BoJack Horseman*.

Another Netflix series, *Sex Education*, provided another example of ace representation in Florence, a minor character who appeared in the show's second season. Again, the shortness of her time on the show made her status as an asexual character less iconic in the aspec community, but her coming-out episode and scene were still highly praised as being extremely informative and validating toward asexuality (Moore, 2020). Particularly, viewers appreciated the episode addressing the feeling of brokenness that many in the community had long experienced: "Sex doesn't make us whole. And so, how could you ever be broken?"[34]

Among those viewers who found a positive impact on their self-perception from these smaller sources, including those from independent media, the importance lay not in the size or cultural relevance of the media, but simply in the validation that comes

[34] The line was spoken by Jean Milburn, a school guidance counselor, to Florence, after the latter comes to her for advice after worrying about her lack of interest in sex.

from having the identity and vocabulary affirmed in text. Bernard discussed the significance of having those words made available to him:

> Having a term for the way I saw the world, the way I saw relationships, the way I saw sexual relations, helped me to organize my own thoughts and organize my own emotions. If I didn't have that word, or that concept in my head, then it would have been harder for me to come to terms with the way I see the world.

For many in the community, getting that vocabulary and seeing that representation with the canon proper makes an immense difference in viewing experience. Indeed, there seems to have occurred in recent years amidst the rise of queer representation and availability of queer media in both niche and mainstream platforms something of a phenomenon of aspec characters only having their orientation acknowledged in supplementary material rather than the canon itself. In addition to the previously discussed Peridot and Alastor, Owen Burnett from *Gargoyles*, Ruby Hale from *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Alix Kubdel and Max Kanté from *Miraculous Ladybug*, Misty Day from *American Horror Story: Coven*, Perry the Platypus from *Phineas and Ferb*, Adrian Veidt from *Watchmen*, and Lilith Clawthorne from *The Owl House* all are characters who are confirmed[35] to be aspec in their respective canons, but viewers would only know this if they were familiar with the social media accounts and behind-the-scenes interviews in which the characters' creators and actors confirmed their identities. While these reveals can be enjoyed by aspec fans who are heavily involved with the online fan communities, for most viewers, the orientations go unacknowledged and unnoticed. As explained by arodabi on Tumblr: "if aspec representation falls in the forest and nobody ever acknowledges it, does it benefit the people it's representing?"

[35] Weisman, 2014; Cameron, 2020; Astruc, 2020; Stack, 2013; Povenmire, 2021; Wigler, 2019; Jones, 2022

The Media Aspecs Want

In studying online communities and in conducting interviews, one question I asked was: What do aspec people *want* out of the media? Considering all the manners in which media impact perception of asexuality and aromanticism, and sex and romance as a whole, what changes does the aspec audience want to see? By far the most common sentiment expressed was simply: inclusion. Aspecs wanted media to show, to make it explicitly clear, that they exist. As Paige, in her interview, stated:

> It would be really nice if they could have an aro character that actually says it. I know a lot of shows will have the person who will be like, oh, I'm not really into that, but they don't explicitly say that they're ace or aro. So it would be really nice if they would just say that, like, give them the label. It feels almost like queerbaiting. Just say the word, that's all you gotta do. It's not that hard.

Of course, other more specific desires for future media were expressed beyond simply inclusion and acknowledgment. For instance, as is the case for the queer community as a whole, many aspec viewers want to see a more diverse range of characters to represent the aspec community, inclusive to aspec people who are older, racially diverse, body diverse, disabled, and encompass different experiences and attitudes toward sex and romance from through the ace and aro spectra (source 0.1; source 0.2). Others, like interviewee Chantal point out the need for media that addresses the struggles faced by the ace and aro communities, and what aphobia looks like and how it impacts aspec people (Frantz, 2011).

Viewers also look toward changing attitudes toward romantic and sexual relationships in general, which can be just as beneficial to allo viewers. Multiple interview subjects, and many commenters, want to see healthier relationships and communication between couples, to see an end to the perpetuation of toxic relationship norms - as LeiyBlithesreen on Reddit comments, "There are many aros here who think such toxic stuff are inherently an allo thing instead of being able to see that it's bothersome for allos

as well.” And aspec viewers are nigh unanimous regarding the importance of showing a wide variety of relationships as significant outside the norms of romantic and sexual relationships, that platonic and familial relationships are just as meaningful. Others too remark on the importance of bringing aspec voices into the creative process behind the scenes (source 0.3).

But more than anything, there is an acknowledgement that visibility must come first, that aces and aros must have their existence known in order for anything else to get addressed. As aggressivelyaromantic on Tumblr writes:

> Without visibility, there are children growing up feeling broken. Without visibility, there are people in relationships they shouldn’t be in. Without visibility, there are people having uncomfortable sex because they assume it’s always like this. Without this, we don’t even exist. Don’t get us wrong. Visibility is certainly not our end goal. But without it, how can we address any of our other problems? Without people knowing asexuals exist and are valid, how will we spread awareness and prevent ace rape? Without people knowing about aromantics, how will we end or at least lessen amatonormativity? Visibility is important because it’s what makes our issues have worth to people outside of our community

Closing Thoughts

While I had been searching for online content for the discourse analysis portion of this paper, I was lucky enough to happen upon a Reddit thread posted by the user ryzapoqa that was simply entitled: “Why is asexual visibility in the media so important?”

The responses to the post were illuminating. They demonstrated an awareness within the community of how powerful the media could be in shaping the way they viewed themselves and their orientation, and how they were viewed by the world at large:

> Why is ANY visibility important?? So people see themselves in the things they read, watch, see. So other people can see people like us having fully realized lives, and being heroes in our own stories. (knightfenris)

> Because I want people to understand what I mean when I tell them 'I'm aroace'. I don't want to explain myself and answer way too personal questions everytime I

> come out to someone just for them to say 'You just haven't met the right person yet'. (lulukitty17)
>
> Should art not try reflect the world as it exists? And if it does, should depicting the vast spectrum of people who exist within it not be a part of that? And does that vast spectrum of people not include us? (CaughttheDarkness)
>
> Visibility is important because it helps make people more likely to accept you. Including yourself. How many people grew up thinking they were broken, because they'd never heard of asexuality before? (9shadowcat9)
>
> In simple terms, I can give it to you in 3 words: validation, normalization, and education. I believe these are the three most important parts of representation existing. (christinelydia900)
>
> I didn't realize I was ace until after college, because I literally didn't even know it was a thing that existed. If there had been any, and I mean any ace rep anywhere in the mainstream media, I could have known who I was at least a decade earlier. I'm glad I know all this [now], but this is a decade I can't get back. (SciFiShroom)

Those in the aspec community who are able to recognize the bias toward romance and sex in the media, and who have been fortunate enough to learn about asexuality and aromanticism, are at an advantage. They have the tools needed to look more deeply into these identities. They are able to reach communities that can join them in examining the media they consume through a critical lens and unlearn the allonormative ideas entrenched within the movies and shows that they watch.

Sadly, though, they are in the minority. The audience of any given piece of media is filled with people who have never had to question the norms that they see in the stories around them. Who have no reason to wonder whether a monogamous sexual and romantic relationship is truly essential to life, or to consider that there are alternatives. And among these audience are countless asexual and aromantic individuals who have never seen anyone like them - or, have never seen anyone like them who was not the butt of a joke, someone who needs to be fixed, or an inhuman monster.

In recent years, media has made more of an effort. Television has been steadily becoming more diverse. Aspec characters have sporadically popped up in shows, and niche media that can be even more inclusive has become more readily accessible through online sources. Ace and aro creators and artists have worked to create the representation that so many mainstream media sources have denied them. But the media still has a long way to go to begin disestablishing the amatonormative values that it has upheld for so long. And the voices of the communities who have been so negatively impacted by these structures are essential seeing the reflection and change that the media industry so desperately needs.

In terms of the popular media experience, the significance of this paper's findings are salient on two fronts: that of the media consumer and the media creator. For the media consumer, this study finds that the narratives in which audiences surround themselves serve as a guideline for navigation of interpersonal relationships and identity. The allonormative, and overwhelmingly heteronormative, media landscape proves alienating to many aspec consumers, and inaccurate or vilified portrayals of aromanticism and asexuality results in internal rejection of or disillusionment with the identity. Aspec viewers, as a group, desire media that reflects their own experiences and depictions and normalizes deviations from the strict relationship norms currently offered by film and television. Consequently, these findings also serve as a cue to media creators to acknowledge the diversity of their audience and consider the impact of their storytelling. Creators have the power and platform to provide representation for a marginalized group, explore overlooked identities and relationships, and work to destigmatize asexuality and aromanticism and showcase honest depictions of the lives, struggles, and desires of those within the community; they, too, have the power to further alienate and pathologize these audience members, and should be made aware of the consequences of continuing the status quo.

Regarding theoretical implications of these findings, this report has aimed to expand the visibility of the ace and aro communities in the field of media research, a field which to this point has lacked a wide audience perspective of the aspec viewing experience. In addition, I hope to have provided a foundation for examining media through a lens that does not take for granted the necessity of romance and sex as an inherent part of the human experience and the media intended to reflect it; such deconstruction of relationship expectations is essential in the realm of queer theory as it pertains to media analysis.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

My primary limitations in this study came in the form of time and materials. My approach to collecting data for discourse analysis mirrored that of Jacobsen et al. (2022), through using key search to manually conduct purposive sampling, but the fact that I am acting as the singular author and data collector prevents me from having as wide a sampling scope as the aforementioned study; my sample, too, did not nearly match the scope possible through computational methods, as did Farrell et al. (2019).

I was able to conduct thorough in-depth interviews with the participants I recruited, but unfortunately the sample did not fully reflect the diversity of the online communities in which I had advertised. Responses to the initial screening form included a wide range of potential candidates in terms of gender, sex, age, race, and orientation. However, when sending out correspondence to set up interviews, I had great difficulty getting responses. My final sample size of nine interview participants varied in gender and in identities within the ace and aro umbrellas, but were more homogenous in other categories. Of the nine subjects, only two were AMAB[36], two were BIPOC[37], and one

[36] Assigned male at birth, used to distinguish between sex and gender. Both AMAB participants were cisgender men. Of the seven participants assigned female at birth, four were cisgender women, and three identified outside of the gender binary.

[37] Black, Indigenous, and people of color

was over the age of 30. The interview subjects all provided valuable insight for this study, but had I had the time needed to continue recruiting and schedule more interviews, I would have liked to have a larger and more diverse sample.

Potential future research into this topic, if a wider array of study participants is available to other researchers, can look further into differences in aspec media experiences based on demographic factors such as gender, sex, age, and ethnicity, and the different expectations and relationship roles placed upon them based on such demographics. My interview subjects also, for the sake of coordinating schedules for interviews, all were residents of the United States, and this paper focused on depictions of sexuality in romance in Western media. Considering that different cultures have different perspectives and expectations in terms of sexual and romantic relationships, and that certain international media provides their own examples of aspec representation - some online users researched here brought up characters from media such as manga[38] and K-dramas[39] - perspectives from international aspec audiences would no doubt yield interesting further insight.

However, I feel the most important takeaway researchers can gain from this paper in future is not necessarily to dive further into this precise topic, but rather to take these findings about aspec audiences and mass media's impact thereupon and expand in broader directions. Amatonormativity in media no doubt is also impactful toward alloromantic, allosexual audiences, and the social messaging brought to attention in this paper is not exclusive to mass media; such topics are worth examining with the

[38] Japanese comics and graphic novels, and TV and film adaptations thereof; some manga that feature canonical aspec representation include *Yagate Kimi ni Naru* (*Bloom Into You*), *Shimanami Tasogare* (*Our Dreams at Dusk*), and *Housekishou Richard-shi no Nazo Kantei* (*The Case Files of Jeweler Richard*).

[39] Live-action TV series and short films produced in South Korea; some K-dramas that feature canonical aspec representation include *Reonon* (*Run On*), *S.O.S Save Me*, and *Wanseonggwa Miwanseongui Sai* (*Between Complete and Incomplete*).

skepticism toward the necessity of sex and romance that aspec media viewers, media analysts, and social researchers have had to take pains to develop.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

- How long have you identified as [asexual/aromantic/aroace]?
- When/how did you first encounter the term or concept of being [asexual/aromantic/aroace]?
    - Was media (movie, TV show, social media, etc.) involved?
- Walk me through your process of figuring out that you were [asexual/aromantic/aroace].
- How do you feel when watching/seeing romantic/sexual content in media?
    - How does that compare to how you feel about romantic/sexual activity in real life?
- Do you feel that the way sex/romance and sexual/romantic relationships are presented in media is accurate to real life?
    - Do you believe that, in general, media places more, less, or the same amount of importance on sex/romance as people do in real life?
    - Do you believe that, in general, people engage in more, less, or the same amount of sexual/romantic activity in the media as people do in real life?
- Do you feel that the presence of sex/romance and sexual/romantic relationships in media impacts your enjoyment of the media?
    - If so, how?
- Do you feel that the presence of sex/romance and sexual/romantic relationships in media impacts your ability to connect or engage with the stories and/or characters?
    - If so, how?
- Are there certain tropes, story beats, or elements related romance/sex that you particularly like or dislike in media?
    - If so, what are they, and can you provide any examples from media you've seen?
- Currently or in the past, do you feel pressure to have a sexual/romantic relationship?
    - If so, what is the source/sources of that pressure?
    - Do you feel pressure from media (movies, TV shows, social media, etc.) to have a sexual/romantic relationship?
    - If so, can you identify specific instances of media making you feel pressured to seek out romance/sex?
- Do you ever feel excluded or misunderstood by the media you consume due to being [asexual/aromantic/aroace]?
    - If so, can you identify specific instances of a piece of media making you feel excluded or misunderstood?
    - Did you ever feel this way about media before discovering that you were [asexual/aromantic/aroace], or only after?

- Do you ever feel that the media you consume is hostile, demeaning, or insulting toward you due to being [asexual/aromantic/aroace]?
    - If so, can you identify specific instances of a piece of media seeming hostile, demeaning, or insulting toward you?
    - Did you ever feel this way about media before discovering that you were [asexual/aromantic/aroace], or only after?
- Can you recall any media that you felt was particularly positive or inclusive to you as an [asexual/aromantic/aroace] viewer?
    - If so, what was the media, and what was it that you found positive or inclusive about this media?
- Do you ever feel left out of fan/audience spaces or activities due to being [asexual/aromantic/aroace]?
    - If so, can you identify specific instances of feeling left out of fan/audience spaces or activities?
    - Did you ever feel this way in fan/audience spaces or activities before discovering that you were [asexual/aromantic/aroace], or only after?
- Have you encountered any instance or community within audience or fandom that you felt was particularly positive or inclusive to you as an [asexual/aromantic/aroace] fan?
    - If so, can you describe what this instance or community was, and what was it that you found positive or inclusive about it?
- Can you recall any specific instances of asexuality and/or aromanticism being featured in media that you have watched?
    - If so, can you identify which piece(s) of media featured asexuality and/or aromanticism?
    - In your opinion, was the depiction of asexuality and/or aromanticism positive, negative, or neutral?
    - In your opinion, was the depiction of asexuality and/or aromanticism accurate?
- If you were able to change the way sex and/or romance was depicted in the media you consume, what changes would you want to make?
- If you were able to change the way asexuality and/or aromanticism was depicted in the media you consume, what changes would you want to make?

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