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Experiences of Asexual People in the LGBTQ+ Community

An Honors Thesis

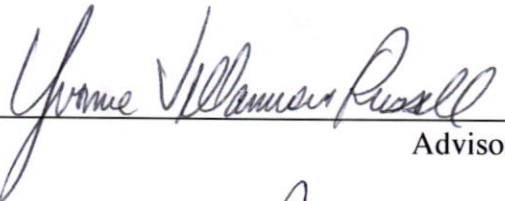
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Submitted to the Texas A&M University-Commerce Honors Committee in partial fulfillment of the Program of Honors Study leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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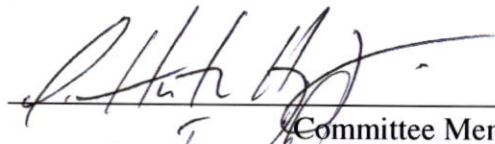
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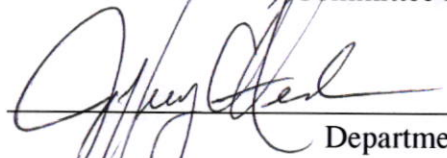
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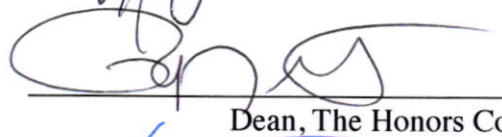
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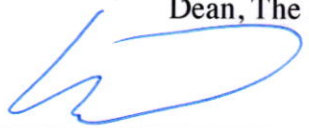
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Experiences of Asexual People in the LGBTQ+ Community

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INTRODUCTION

In 1948, Alfred Kinsey wrote one of the most commonly cited books about human sexuality, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey revolutionized society's understanding of human sexuality with his conclusion that most humans were not fully heterosexual or homosexual, but rather somewhere in between. However, Kinsey's research has become increasingly outdated as new labels for sexuality and gender identities become popular. For example, he encountered one aspect of sexuality that he did not seem to fully understand, which he labeled "Group X," (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). While Kinsey theorized that those in Group X would eventually settle somewhere on the "normal" scale of human sexuality, many now believe that the people in Group X were asexual. Asexual is a relatively new label for a sexual orientation, and very little was understood about it until Anthony Bogaert published his study that claimed that one percent of the population identified as not heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, but instead considered themselves asexual (Bogaert, 2004). Asexuality is a sexual orientation, just like heterosexuality or homosexuality, but asexual people are not sexually attracted to anyone, regardless of sex or gender. In his book *Understanding Asexuality*, Bogaert (2012), now the leading researcher on asexuality, explains that he prefers the definition of "lack of sexual attraction" rather than lack of sexual desire, because "a lack of desire may not capture accurately the phenomenon of asexuality...[because] recent research on self-identified asexuals shows that they do not necessarily have a lower desire for sexual activity, but they clearly have a lower desire for sexual activity *with others*" (p. 22).

Here, I examine the first-hand experiences of asexual people within the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) community, and their encounters with people of other minority sexual orientations. I also examine their experiences with discrimination or

acceptance within the LGBTQ+ community, both in online and in-person spaces. My research focuses on the following research questions: 1) What are some common experiences of out-of-the-closet asexual people in general, 2) Have asexual people experienced discrimination from other sexual minorities, and 3) What do asexual people experience when placed in LGBTQ+ spaces, such as events or online spaces?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pool of research on asexuality and asexual people is relatively small. However, I found as many resources as possible that discussed the questions I wanted to address in my own research. While there was limited research discussing asexual people's relationships with the larger LGBTQ+ community, I was able to find a sizeable amount of literature which helped me build a methodology and understand several of the concepts that I would be researching, including asexuality as a whole, the types of discrimination typically experienced by LGBTQ+ people, and the ways that minority groups express prejudices against each other.

I will first discuss asexuality as a concept, and give an overview of how the orientation has been treated in academia. I will then discuss research which touches on my first research question: what are the general experiences of asexual people? Finally, I will discuss research that covers discrimination between minority groups in general.

Asexuality

While there are few academic resources on asexuality, there are still many resources that people can turn to for information. Many of these are online, as it is often the first place people turn to when they are seeking information about minority sexual orientations, especially those that are lesser-known. The largest single source of information on asexuality is the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). AVEN was created by asexual people, both for the

benefit of other asexual people looking for information or to create community bonds, and also in order to educate the general public about asexuality as a concept. AVEN's extensive archive of information about the different forms of asexuality, made it a good place to start looking for information. AVEN explains what asexuality is, and expands on the Asexual Spectrum, which explains that sexual attraction is not simply there or not there, but that it exists in different amounts for different people. For example, grey-asexual people are on the asexual spectrum in "the area between asexuality and sexuality, for example because they experience sexual attraction very rarely, only under specific circumstances, or of an intensity so low that it's ignorable" (AVEN). They also explain what one might experience as an asexual person, and have resources for asexual people and for others who are simply seeking information.

The most reliable single source of information on asexuality is Bogaert's (2012) *Understanding Asexuality*. Bogaert provides a clear explanation of asexuality and discusses several issues associated with asexuality as a whole. He also explains asexuality's importance as a field of study within human sexuality research, because he believes that understanding a lack of sexual attraction could help people further understand what sexual attraction and sexuality actually are. Bogaert argues that, as it challenges heteronormative viewpoints, and because asexual people face similar prejudice and erasure – that is, the omission of specific groups of people from history, mass media, or common language – as those with other minority sexual orientations, that asexuality is a valid viewpoint within queer theory as well.

Przybylo and Cooper (2014) expand on Bogaert's aim to justify asexuality as not only a legitimate sexual orientation, but as a legitimate "queer" sexual orientation. Including asexuality in queer studies establishes another connection between asexual people and the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. They begin by stating that "asexuality is almost entirely absent in queer,

feminist, and critical sexuality studies” despite the fact that asexual visibility has increased in academic fields in recent years (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014, p. 298). They urge literary critics to recognize asexuality as a field of study within literature, particularly within queer theory. While this article mainly focuses on asexuality’s place in literary criticism, many of the arguments for why they view asexuality as a legitimate queer sexual orientation are beneficial to a broad understanding of asexuality and the asexual community.

Scherrer (2010) takes a similar approach to the study of asexuality as Przybylo and Cooper in claiming that asexuality is a legitimate queer sexual orientation, but does so in the context of social movements and queer relationships. After performing 102 surveys with self-identified asexual people, she notes many issues present in current societal discussions of relationships and of social reform movements, which tend to focus on same-sex marriage and often exclude asexual people and their nonsexual relationships. She states that, “it is difficult for [people] to understand ‘a relationship without sex,’ perhaps because of their perceived interrelatedness of sex and intimacy,” further explaining that “sex has been used as the standard that delineates romantic relationships from friendship and defines these relationships as importantly different,” (Scherrer, 2010, p. 65). Scherrer calls for researchers to find new ways to discuss and define romance and relationships. Scherrer’s further relation of asexuality to the LGBTQ+ community is beneficial due to its further explanation of asexuality, as well as its discussion of asexual relationships.

After building a fundamental understanding of asexuality, it is much easier to understand prejudice against asexuality as discussed in some of the following articles. However, my research was not about what asexuality is or whether it is a legitimate queer sexuality, but rather

on what asexual people experience as a result of their orientation. Therefore, I will next discuss research that also seeks to explain what asexual people experience in their day to day lives.

Experiences of Asexual People

Near the end of *Understanding Asexuality*, Bogaert (2012) attempts to discuss the prejudices, oppression, and erasure faced by the asexual community, but ends up skirting around the issue. Despite his apparent reluctance or inability to address this discrimination fully, he acknowledges that asexual people face prejudices similar to those faced by the larger LGBTQ+ community, and are especially affected by erasure.

Chasin (2015) further discusses some of the biases toward asexual people brought up by Bogaert (2012). Chasin's research is primarily conceptual and descriptive, and his main goal is to provide a short overview of the asexual community in order to convince other psychologists or sexologists to do more research on the community. He describes the formation of the asexual community amidst (and in response to) anti-asexual discrimination, homophobia due to misunderstanding a person's sexual orientation or due to intersectional identities (asexual people in same-gender relationships), and the fact that the medical community still categorizes asexuality as a mental illness (see DSM: Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Chasin focuses on the formation of a coherent asexual community, particularly through AVEN (The Asexual Visibility and Education Network) and each person's ability to form and maintain their identity in the face of social bias. His research relies on the idea that anti-asexual bias exists, and that this bias is important in asexual people's lives.

The inclusion of asexuality in the DSM as a mental illness (Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder) or as a symptom of other mental illnesses (reduced sexual attraction or desire is cited

as a symptom of depression) is mentioned by several researchers as a key reason for the societal prejudices toward asexuality (Chasin, 2015; Scott & Dawson, 2015). The DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) lists a number of different mental disorders relating to the lack of sexual attraction or desire. The most commonly cited is [Male] Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD/MHSDD) which is primarily defined as “persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual/erotic thoughts or fantasies and desire for sexual activity” that lasts for at least 6 months (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 440). The DSM specifies a similar sexual dysfunction disorder for women, known as Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder. Additionally, the DSM mentions that asexual behaviors can be a side effect of medication or substance abuse, and labels such behaviors as Substance/Medication Induced Sexual Dysfunction. Finally, decreased sexual desire is mentioned as a symptom of nonsexual mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, or mood disorders, of other sexual disorders, such as Genito-Pelvic Pain Disorder, and of other medical factors, such as thyroid problems, arthritis, or irritable bowel syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 433-443). With the large number of medical diagnoses that could be attributed to asexuality, people are able to back up their prejudices against asexuality with science, as they did when homosexuality was a diagnosable disorder before the 1970s (Herek, 2010).

MacInnis and Hodson (2012) took the study of anti-asexual bias one step further by not just studying the asexual community based on understood bias, but analyzing the bias itself. They measured the bias that asexual people face from the heterosexual community, and often society in general. They looked at this bias along four scales: 1) general attitude toward asexual people, 2) dehumanization (ratings of perceived differences between humans and animals [uniqueness] or robots [nature]) (Bastian & Haslam, 2010, p. 107), 3) contact intent (similar to

Bogardus's (1933) Social Distance Scale, which measures how much association the participant would desire to have with the target), and 4) discrimination intent (would you hire this person, etc.). They concluded that heterosexual people viewed asexuality as more negative and less desirable than homosexuality or bisexuality, which implied an anti-asexual bias outside of the general sexual minority bias. Additionally, they found that bias against asexual people was not simply a result of unfamiliarity, because heterosexual participants had more negative reactions to asexuality than other poorly-known sexual orientations.

Scott and Dawson (2015) obtain a more sociological perspective of the asexual community by conducting online surveys of over 30 self-identified asexual people and asking about their relationships with others and their experiences with prejudice. They found that people were more likely to be "out of the closet" with their friends than they were with either their families or their coworkers, but that those who were "out" to more people were also more likely to face open prejudice or discrimination from those around them.

After developing an understanding of asexual people's experiences, it was also important that I understood discrimination in general. Without a thorough knowledge of types of discrimination, I could have missed signs of subtler discrimination. I also wanted to find sources that specifically discussed prejudice between different minority groups, as the discrimination in those cases often has different causes and may not be the same as the forms of discrimination that are popular within majority groups.

Prejudice between Minority Groups

Allport (1954) discussed bias between different minority groups and what he thought to be the two possible outcomes when marginalized groups interacted with each other. One of his theories was that the marginalized communities would avoid discriminating against each other

because their own experiences with discrimination would allow them to empathize with another oppressed party. His other theory was that the minority communities would be influenced by the social norms of the majority community and would be prejudiced toward each other in order to try and gain favor with the majority and avoid experiencing any more discrimination.

Allport's (1954) hypotheses went relatively untested for some time. However, Shapiro and Neuberg (2008) determined to examine the social contexts that could lead to either outcome. They determined, after four extensive experiments, that there were a number of factors which contributed to minority group members' decisions to either discriminate against other minority communities or to accept them. Namely, they found that men were more likely to discriminate against other minorities than women were. They also concluded that marginalized communities were more likely to discriminate against others if they were under the impression that members of the majority community would be aware of their decision. While Allport and Shapiro and Neuberg's research primarily focuses on racial minorities, their hypotheses and findings are important in the field of Queer Studies research. In particular, the observation of the social factors that influence minority communities' reactions to each other (namely gender and the attention given to their decisions) is important when studying biases between different LGBTQ+ groups and the context in which those biases exist.

Burke and LaFrance (2015) studied both heterosexual or homosexual people's opinions on various sexual orientations (heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual) in order to determine which orientations were viewed most positively or negatively by each community. They determined perceptions of bisexual people based on gender performance, stability, faithfulness, and positive and negative stereotypes. Their tests determined that heterosexual people rated fellow heterosexual people the highest and bisexual people lower than both heterosexual and

homosexual people. Homosexual people, on the other hand, rated bisexual people almost as highly as fellow homosexual people – and much higher than heterosexual people – in some cases. This was not true of all four categories, as both heterosexual and homosexual participants rated bisexual people lowest in the category of stability. While the ratings of gender performance, stability, faithfulness, and stereotypes are not particularly useful for my research, the results of Burke and LeFrance's research are intriguing, as their hypothesis – that bisexual people would be rated lowest in all categories by both heterosexual and homosexual participants because of low visibility and general societal negativity – was not supported.

Despite the fact that Burke and LeFrance's (2015) hypothesis was not supported, other researchers have found evidence that there is general anti-bisexual bias within the homosexual community. Mohr and Rochlen (1999) studied lesbians' and gay men's attitudes toward bisexual people. In general, homosexual people were moderately tolerant of bisexual people, but gay men were significantly more likely to have negative attitudes toward bisexuality than lesbians. Additionally, they found that lesbians and gay men were more likely to have positive attitudes toward bisexual people if they knew one in their personal life. In general, tolerance scores showed that homosexual people were willing to accept bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation, but low stability scores and low contact intent (i.e. few people were willing to have a bisexual best friend or romantic partner) implied that lesbians and gay men disapproved of behaviors or perceived stereotypes (such as promiscuity) associated with the bisexual community.

Brewster and Moradi (2010) took a different approach to the study of anti-bisexual bias than Burke and LeFrance (2015) or Mohr and Rochlen (1999). Instead of asking heterosexual or homosexual populations about their prejudices, they asked bisexual participants about their first-

hand experiences with discrimination. They experienced more prejudice connected to the stereotype that bisexuality is an unstable sexual orientation (which is supported by both of the aforementioned studies), but participants also reported instances of bias concerning sexual irresponsibility (the perception that bisexual people are more likely to have a sexually transmitted infection) and interpersonal hostility (personal attacks on oneself as a result of one's orientation). Additionally, while they found that there were more reports of bias from heterosexual people, participants reported almost the same number of instances of anti-bisexual bias from homosexual people as heterosexual people.

Due to the low visibility of the asexual community, there has been little research done on perceptions of the community, and even less has been written about their experiences within the larger LGBTQ+ community. After analyzing previous studies, I decided that my own research should address the questions: (1) What are the experiences of asexual people, and what forms of discrimination have they encountered? (2) Have asexual people faced similar discrimination from other sexual minorities, such as homosexual or bisexual people? and (3) Are asexual people typically accepted into or rejected from the LGBTQ+ community and their spaces? I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of what asexual people experience regularly as a result of their orientation, and also of how the asexual community and the rest of the LGBTQ+ community tend to interact.

METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative interviews for data collection to maximize the amount of storytelling the participants were able to do. I wanted to ask people about specific individual experiences and I felt that even an open-ended questionnaire would not allow the same detail in someone's answers, because people tend to write less than they say, and because even if they wrote as much

as possible, I would still lose the aspects of tone of voice which allowed a more thorough understanding of their emotional responses. I was also able to control the direction of the conversation through probing and follow-up questions in the context of an interview, or to add additional questions or avoid others, depending on how the interview was progressing. Surveys and questionnaires, on the other hand, would have limited the amount of data I could obtain. Additionally, because the participants could meet me or speak directly to me, and have the option to ask me questions in return, I could establish rapport and they felt more comfortable around me than if they took an online survey. The interview format also increased validity, as I was able to understand the participants' intent more thoroughly.

Sampling

I used convenience sampling to find an adequate number of participants. I only interviewed those who self-identified as asexual and were “out of the closet” in order to minimize the risk of psychological harm to my participants. Participants were made aware of my research through fliers and were given the option to reach out to me; I did not solicit interviews from anyone.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a series of interviews with asexual people, in which we discussed their personal experiences with discrimination or acceptance by others, particularly those within the LGBTQ+ community. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning that a common set of questions (available in Appendix A) was asked to each participant, but the participant or researcher could direct the conversation to get the maximum amount of information or to keep the participant comfortable with the amount of information they were sharing. Each participant was asked to meet in a place in which they were comfortable, and was given the option of an

online interview in place of a face-to-face interview if they felt uncomfortable meeting in person. Most participants elected to utilize online interviews; only one participant agreed to meet in person in a public space. Many participants chose the online interview option for convenience, as they lived too far away. Participants took part in one interview session which was approximately half an hour in length.

I recorded audio of the interviews, which I later transcribed. I also analyzed the data as it was collected by coding the interviews as soon as they were completed, with the goal of learning from the first few interviews and applying that knowledge to later interviews. I was able to add or alter questions based on the information I gained from analyzing the data, which improved the quality of each interview. The initial coding process allowed me to note details in the individual interviews and to develop preliminary descriptive codes. Additionally, the data was coded a second time, in which I used the “Constant Comparative Method,” which involved comparing the findings of each interview against each other and triangulating against existing literature in order to create broad categories of description (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I wanted to interview participants within the “millennial” generation (ages 18-35) because of potential generational differences in experience. This is especially true of the asexual community, because the label “asexual” was popularized so recently that younger people would be the first generation that was able to grow up understanding their sexuality and having a label and a community like other facets of the LGBTQ+ community. It appears that a common experience for older asexual people is knowing they were “different” but not understanding how until late into their adult lives (Scott, McDonnell, & Dawson, 2014). While that experience would also be an interesting study, I wanted specifically to understand how the existence of an

asexual community – and how asexual people fit into the LGBTQ+ community – affects participants’ lives, so it seemed pertinent to limit my study to a younger generation.

Limitations and Concerns

Qualitative research is always subject to problems of validity, although I tried to combat these problems to the best of my ability. While there was little I could do to prevent problems of validity on the side of the participant, such as lying or exaggeration, I did what I could to make this research as valid as possible on my side. I utilized bracketing, a process in which I wrote a journal entry of sorts in which I could reflect on my reactions to the data after I analyzed it (available in Appendix B). My advisor coded a subsample of the interviews and compared the results to my own codes to check for reliability and to safeguard against bias. Unfortunately, the research was limited by nonrandom convenience sampling and is therefore only applicable to the specific participants and not to a general population.

One of my main concerns considering participants’ safety was that of privacy and security. I recorded audio of the interviews, but no video was recorded. In order to ensure that participants’ names did not need to be attached to the research, they were assigned a pseudonym and gave verbal informed consent. Participants could select the location of the interview, as long as it was deemed reasonably safe for both myself and the participant, and the option of an online interview was also available. Participants were also allowed to terminate the interview at any time without consequence, and were notified of that ability at the beginning of the interview process.

FINDINGS

Interviews were conducted with ten participants. Eight of the participants identified as asexual and two as demisexual. Demisexual people are on the asexual spectrum, and “only

experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed” (AVEN). All participants were white. Two were male, five were female, and three were nonbinary genders. Eight participants were from the United States, one was from Finland, and one was from The Netherlands. Participants ranged in age from 18-28, with a mean age of 21.6 and a median age of 21. All of the participants also had a non-straight romantic orientation: 4 participants identified as panromantic, 3 as aromantic, 3 as biromantic, and 2 as homoromantic (participants were able to identify as multiple romantic orientations).

I hoped to answer three questions during my interviews: (1) What do asexual people experience, both in general, and in terms of discrimination? (2) Do they face similar forms of discrimination from other LGBTQ+ people? and (3) Are they accepted into or excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces and the community as a whole?

Experiences and Discrimination

Many of the participants had similar experiences involving their asexuality. While I would not go so far as to claim there is a universal asexual experience, just as there is no universal experience for any minority, there are common themes in the lives of the participants.

Typically, participants discussed a journey of self discovery. They typically began this journey feeling different and/or ostracized because of their lack of sexual attraction, which eventually led to discovering the label of asexuality and realizing it fit them well. Many also mention that the community encourages self-identification; they put information out there so people have the ability to recognize signs of asexuality, but never assign the label to anyone. Jennifer¹ explains that, in her experience, the asexual community and the LGBTQ+ organization in her area put a particular emphasis on self-identification:

¹ All participant's names are pseudonyms.

[They] tried to emphasize about the importance of self-identification and stuff like that, so nobody can actually tell you that you are wrong, because it's more important that people have, like, the freedom to be who they are and say who they are and determine for themselves what they want to be.

The asexual community in particular wants people to find validation, and does not want to force someone to identify in a way that makes people uncomfortable.

Nine out of ten participants discovered the label online. Many were actively searching for an explanation for why they felt different, like Andy, who "was on the computer at 2:00am, self-esteem down to almost non-existent, wondering why [they were] so broken compared to [their] friends" and in looking for an explanation, they "found an Asexual Forum that had people discussing their feelings and experiences" and immediately felt a connection with the label. Others happened to stumble upon it while browsing and simply realized that it fit. Melanie described that she just found the label

I went onto Tumblr, and [found] a ton of stuff on Tumblr about gender identity and sexuality and all that stuff, and so I was just looking through a list and I found asexual and that was attraction to no one, and I realized, once I knew that that was an option I knew that that's what I was, 'cause I've never felt sexually attracted to anyone.

The participants felt an immediate connection to asexuality upon finding it, because most of them were aware of their feelings for a long time, and they had finally found a word to describe it. Most also mentioned that the majority of their socialization with other asexual and LGBTQ+ people occurred online, which alludes to a dependence on the internet within the asexual community. Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop (2004) discuss a similar dependence in other marginalized groups, "with an emphasis on how members of the LGBT community are using the

internet to express their marginalized ‘queer’ identities and achieve social change in their local living environment” (p. 787).

All of the participants described a feeling of comfort and validation upon discovering the label of asexuality, because it helped explain their feelings and gave them a place to belong. Many also mentioned that it felt like identifying as asexual gave them permission to be themselves, because it made it clear that there was not a serious problem with them. Taylor discussed growing up as asexual without realizing that asexuality existed: “it isn’t nice for young asexuals ‘cause I did cry a lot, feeling confused basically my entire youth.” Abigail explained even further the consequences she faced in her childhood, including that “at a *very* young age, I had literally convinced myself that I had no emotion and that I was dead inside” because she conflated sexual desire to equate to emotion in general. Emma benefited a lot in terms of her relationships with others after learning about asexuality.

I got into relationships with people that I was not actually attracted to and it never worked, but once I figured out that, you know “hey, I’m not straight,” it made sense why it didn’t work, and it also kind of gave me permission to step away from the notion that you have to be a sexual being, because there are a lot of times that I’m not, and it just kind of helped me get clarity with a lot of my relationships in the past...and it helped me to understand the relationship I’m currently in and to come at it honestly with my partner and explain that I’m not a straight person and this isn’t a straight relationship.

Generally, participants benefited from discovering asexuality. All of the participants cited identifying as asexual as a positive time in their lives.

Participants referenced a few forms of discrimination, namely erasure (9), medicalization (6), compulsory heterosexuality (4), dehumanization (3), and social distance (2). Erasure was the

most common, as almost all of the participants encountered erasure in at least one form. Most cited the most neutral form of erasure: ignorance. Most people simply did not know that asexuality existed. This often makes asexual people uncomfortable, especially in situations when they come out to people, because they are forced to lecture the other person on what their orientation is. Coming out is often a very emotional time, and people's ignorance can take the focus off of the asexual person's emotions and make the situation more about the other person's education. Others mentioned a few other examples of uncomfortable coming-out situations based on others' ignorance of asexuality, such as one participant whose father constantly forgot that she was asexual, which forced her to come out five separate times (Emma), or another participant whose roommate felt the need to ask really personal questions about their sex life (Bailey). Others discussed the inability to be "casually out" as asexual because of how uncommon it is, such as Jennifer, who knows lesbians who often casually come out by simply saying, "oh, my girlfriend," and lamented that she has no asexual-specific equivalent.

In addition to the relatively passive erasure of ignorance, participants mentioned some more explicit forms of erasure. Taylor brought up their annoyance at asexuality being purposefully removed from a media narrative. In this case, they were discussing the show *Riverdale*, which is based on *Archie* comics. In the comics, the character Jughead Jones was explicitly stated to be asexual, but the developers of the show decided to make him heterosexual (Alexander, 2017). There was a lot of public outcry from both asexual and aromantic people after Jughead was revealed to be heterosexual, as those communities lost one of very few pieces of representation they had in popular media. A few participants faced openly hostile moments of erasure. Several mentioned that they had been told by others that "asexuality doesn't exist" and one was accused of faking oppression for attention (Amy). These hostile moments are some of

the most harmful experiences of erasure, because they make asexual people question their validation, and because they actively reinforce the subtler forms of erasure, like ignorance, by hiding information about asexuality from others.

A little over half the participants were subjected to discrimination based on medicalization, which is the process of deciding that asexuality is actually a medical disorder or a symptom of another disorder (Chasin, 2015; Herek, 2010; Scott & Dawson, 2015). Random people felt the need to try and diagnose the participants with medical disorders to explain away their identity. Many were accused of being “repressed” (Jennifer) or having “a hormone imbalance” (Amy). Others tried to say that asexuality itself was a medical condition or a mental disorder, and one participant was even diagnosed with HSDD (John). Having one’s orientation dismissed as simply a medical issue can make asexual people lose some of the validation they receive at discovering the orientation in the first place. Many of the participants spent years convinced that there was something about them that was broken, only to find relief from that feeling when they discovered asexuality, and then people came in and told them that there was something physically or psychologically wrong with them, and took away their relief.

Other forms of discrimination were those based on compulsory heterosexuality, in which society deems heterosexuality the default sexual orientation, as it is enforced by and supports those in power (Rich, 1980/2003). People tend to assume that others are heterosexual until proven otherwise, and therefore prescribe heterosexual roles to strangers and then demonize them for not fitting into those roles. In a way, all of the participants were subjected to compulsory heterosexuality, as coming out of the closet is a feature of a heterosexual society. It is considered to be the responsibility of LGBTQ+ individuals to defy the assumption that everyone is heterosexual by revealing that they do not fit that assumption (Rich, 1980/2003).

However, some of the participants were subjected to much more specific discriminations based on compulsory heterosexuality. For example, when John came out as asexual to his mother, she responded by accusing him of “faking it so [he] could have sex with girls and she wouldn’t be suspicious.” Andy’s mother also reacted negatively to their coming out, telling them “to ‘stop acting so desperate,’ and that [they’d] ‘find a guy eventually.’” Several of the AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) participants struggled with expectations from society, and particularly their families, for them to have children (Emma, Taylor). Emma elaborated further, explaining that for a significant portion of her life, her father would “try to guilt [her] into having children for him...[and] that’s an awful thing to do to someone.” She had to spend years convincing her father that she did not want children before he started seeing her as an independent human and not as a grandchild-producing machine.

Some of the less common types of discrimination were dehumanization and social distance. Only a few participants encountered dehumanization from others, but that does not mean that it had less of an impact on those who did. Jennifer was told that “you are not a person if you don’t want to have sex and [she] basically started crying.” Additionally, while most participants did not experience discrimination in terms of social distance, two participants’ significant others broke up with them because of their identity (Melanie, Bailey).

Discrimination and Experiences in the LGBTQ+ Community

Asexual people seemed to experience less discrimination from other LGBTQ+ people than straight people, although there were a few examples. Bailey, who was broken up with because of their asexuality, was dating an LGBTQ+ woman at the time. Many asexual participants also faced similar neutral or negative reactions to coming out of the closet from

other LGBTQ+ people. For example, Andy chose to come out to their gay friend before coming out to anyone else, and he did not care and they were hurt by his reaction.

Three participants mentioned that asexual people are sometimes excluded from the larger LGBTQ+ community because they “aren’t oppressed” (Andy) or otherwise alluded to a hierarchy of oppression within the community. A few participants discussed a subset of the LGBTQ+ community that believes asexual people do not belong or that asexuality “isn’t as big of a deal as being gay or lesbian” (Andy). Another participant mentioned that some LGBTQ+ people do not believe asexuality exists at all, and that asexual people are “just ‘straight’” (Taylor). In general, the some members of the LGBTQ+ community will exclude asexual people from the community on the grounds that asexual people are able to ‘pass’ as straight, which means that they are not as visibly oppressed. The forms of discrimination faced by asexual people are not considered violent or obvious enough to warrant asexual inclusion.

While some had experienced some pushback from a small section of the LGBTQ+ community, overall, the participants seemed to agree that members of the community were more open and accepting than straight people. Bailey gave the example that “the straight people [they] know sort of follow, very much, the heteronormative script of ‘get married, have babies, white picket fence,’ ...whereas the queer people [they] know...don’t have those expectations.” Other participants simply mention that they feel the need to be “more careful or guarded” with straight people because “they’ve usually been more closed-minded” (Henry). While participants’ experiences with LGBTQ+ may not have been perfect, overall, they are more positive than their experiences with straight people. John describes the difference in terms of acceptance, saying that he typically faces “disbelief or doubt” when interacting with straight people, but that it’s “uncommon for [LGBTQ+ people] to go out of their way to say that [asexuality] is wrong.”

Similarly, most participants also mentioned that they were able to communicate better and felt more comfortable with other asexual people than with LGBTQ+ people in general. While their experiences with LGBTQ+ people were already more positive than those with straight people, they could form closer bonds with fellow asexual people based on their shared experiences. John and Emma both mentioned that they feel more comfortable around asexual people, which allows them to be casual and “joke around.” Amy said that she feels more empathy with other asexual people and that they are “more free to talk about [asexuality] knowing that other people have had those same experiences.” Jennifer also interacts differently with asexual people based on the experiences she can share with them.

With aces it's more about sharing this common experience. And with others it's more about, like, validating their experiences, validating the experience of the other, sort of, because I, I cannot really understand what it feels like, and they can't really understand me either. Because it's just different, but we can both understand that the other is right, sort of, in a different way, maybe, than heterosexual people can because it's so integrated in our culture and sociology that, uh, that heterosexual love and romantic love is, like, like, the norm. So if you're different, there's this fundamental difference, sort of. It's a different kind of difference, with asexual and with other kind of folk, bisexual for example, but it's still different that there's still this common ground. But with ace people I can go somewhat, sort of deeper, and, uh, otherwise different kind of. For example, with this friend of mine who's demisexual, we talk a lot about, like, the romantic aspect of it. And, uh, like, fears that we have about, well, being alone, uh, not finding, not finding, uh, people to share life with. But, with others we talk more about maybe like, uh, society and societal pressure and stuff like that. Jennifer

Essentially, she felt like she was able to bond with other asexual people on a more personal level, whereas her interactions with other LGBTQ+ people were more general, and they discussed broader subjects.

Acceptance into the LGBTQ+ Community

However, despite pushback from some members of the LGBTQ+ community and the fact that participants felt closer to asexual people than LGBTQ+ people in general, many participants were active in LGBTQ+ spaces and were welcomed by the community. Most of the participants were accepted by the community and felt safe and happy there, both in online spaces and at events such as Pride. Amy described a sense of elation at attending her first Pride Parade, and said “it was just a really awesome experience; there was no negativity on that day.” Henry described his experience at Pride as “overwhelmingly supportive” and specifically mentioned enjoying “being able to meet other people that identified the same way.” Jennifer attended several different events, including a regularly-meeting “Asexual Night.” She also mentioned that “the local LGBTQ organization is really open to asexual people and think that that’s important.” In general, participants were more often accepted into the LGBTQ+ community than excluded.

Knowing the forms of discrimination faced by asexual people is important, as it sheds light on the general experiences of a lesser-known community, and how they are accepted into mainstream society. It also sets up a basis of information that could help increase knowledge of the experiences of other communities with similar amounts of visibility, such as aromantic and nonbinary people. These communities would likely have similar amounts of information available, and the people involved in those communities may have similar experiences with erasure and medicalization. Understanding asexual people’s involvement and acceptance in the LGBTQ+ community also widens our understanding of the community as a whole, and draws

attention to the subset of the community that wishes to exclude asexuality on the basis of a hierarchy of oppression reveals a preoccupation with their own exclusion from straight society. However, knowing that the asexual participants were more often welcomed into the community shows how open and accepting the LGBTQ+ community generally is.

CONCLUSIONS

I sought to gain an understanding of asexual experiences in this research, particularly concerning their experiences with discrimination and with the LGBTQ+ community. More specifically, I wanted to know: (1) What are the experiences of asexual people, and what forms of discrimination have they encountered? (2) Have asexual people faced similar discrimination from other sexual minorities, such as homosexual or bisexual people? and (3) Are asexual people typically accepted into or rejected from the LGBTQ+ community and their spaces?

I found that my participants had a number of experiences in common, including the fact that they all had a relatively similar journey of self-identification, which began with feelings of being different, and then finding the label online and realizing it fit, and ending in feelings of validation. Additionally, all of the participants were LGBTQ+ in multiple ways outside of their asexual identity. In terms of discrimination, a majority of the participants faced discrimination in terms of erasure, medicalization, and compulsory heterosexuality, and a few also experienced dehumanization and social distance.

Asexual people experienced a small amount of discrimination from LGBTQ+ people, although they typically had good experiences interacting with other LGBTQ+ people. When they did experience discrimination, it often was not the same kind of discrimination that they experienced from straight people, but instead was discrimination based on a hierarchy of oppression, and asexual people were excluded on the basis of not being oppressed enough. In

general, though, asexual people treated well by LGBTQ+ people and were accepted into the LGBTQ+ community.

The majority of my findings reinforced previous research on asexual people, LGBTQ+ people, and minority groups. Medicalization of minority groups, especially the asexual community and the LGBTQ+ community, was covered by a number of sources. Herek (2010) discussed medicalization as a form of discrimination in terms of homosexuality's inclusion in the original DSM in 1952, and Chasin (2015) used the same terms to discuss discrimination against asexual people based on asexuality's inclusion in the current version of the DSM. The fact that several participants mentioned that others told them that asexuality was simply a mental disorder, and not a legitimate sexual orientation, supports Herek and Chasin's ideas about society using medicine to back up their prejudice.

MacInnis and Hodson (2012) found that asexual people experienced discrimination based on dehumanization (the idea that asexual people's lack of sexual attraction makes them less emotional and therefore less human) and on contact intent (the idea that people would be less likely to want to be friends with or date an asexual person because of their orientation). While participants mentioned these forms of discrimination less often than others, they were still present in their lives.

When discussing discrimination between various minority groups, Allport (1954) mentioned that he believed that minority group members would either treat other minorities well because they would empathize with others in similar marginalized situations, or that minority group members would believe negative stereotypes about other minorities and would discriminate against them. Shapiro and Neuberg (2008) tested Allport's hypotheses and discovered that, generally, minorities avoided discriminating against other minorities because

they felt a bond with other marginalized individuals, unless they knew that those in the majority were aware of their decision, in which case they were more likely to decide to discriminate against others in order to align themselves with the majority. My findings did not support Shapiro and Neuberg's work. While it was true that the LGBTQ+ community typically did not discriminate against the asexual community and often welcomed them as fellow members of the LGBTQ+ community, when they did discriminate against asexual people, their motives seemed very different than what Shapiro and Neuberg found. When members of the LGBTQ+ community discriminated against asexual people, they did so on the basis of a hierarchy of oppression, and said that asexual people did not fall high enough on that hierarchy to belong in the the LGBTQ+ community. Instead of rejecting asexual people in order to align themselves with the majority (straight people) they did so to further themselves from the majority, while claiming that it was asexual people who were too closely aligned with straight people.

Despite the fact that my findings were often in line with previous research, it's important to note that they must be taken with a grain of salt. The sample size of this study was incredibly small, and the experiences of ten people cannot be generalized to fit the entire asexual population. The sample also only consisted of asexual people who also had non-straight romantic orientations, which could have affected the participants' experiences with acceptance into the LGBTQ+ community. While the community may not have accepted asexual people in general, they may have been accepting of an asexual homoromantic person, because that person is considered gay enough to belong to the community. It would be pertinent to extend this research to more fully understand asexual people's experiences in the LGBTQ+ community by increasing the sample size, and particularly doing a study with a large sample of heteroromantic cisgender

asexual people, in order to adequately gauge whether asexual people are accepted into the LGBTQ+ community when no other factors are at play.

In addition to the small number of participants, the sample was not very diverse. All ten of the participants were white, and the experiences of asexual people of color could differ very much from white asexual people's experiences. All the participants were between the ages of 18-28. The experiences asexual people over 30 would likely be very different from the experiences of people in this age range, because of limited access to information in their youth. Additionally, younger asexual people could also have different experiences because of increased access to information, and growing visibility of asexuality. A study of various groups of asexual people, limited by age, race, gender, or other factors that could affect their experiences as asexual people would help reveal some of the intersectionalities that exist in asexual people's lives.

Qualitative research methods could also help increase understanding of how discrimination and acceptance into the LGBTQ+ community affect other lesser-known orientations, such as aromantic or nonbinary people. The asexual and aromantic communities are closely associated with each other, and aromantic people likely have very similar experiences with forms of discrimination, both from straight people, and on the terms of a hierarchy of oppression within the LGBTQ+ community. Nonbinary people, on the other hand, are often included in the LGBTQ+ under the transgender umbrella, but likely have a very similar experience with lack of information and erasure.

Finally, there are a number of possible explanations for the majority of the asexual community finding information and forming communities online. For example, the asexual community is so small that it may be difficult to find others in in-person settings, or LGBTQ+ people may turn to the internet because online interactions tend to be less dangerous than face-

to-face interactions, or simply because information is easier to find online, especially about something relatively new. A study could be designed that could reveal the reasons for the participants' dependence on the Internet for both finding asexuality and for forming communities.

While this study was subject to multiple limitations, and would benefit from further research into many different areas of both asexual and LGBTQ+ existence, having a first-person, in-depth, emotionally driven perspective of asexual people and their experiences has highlighted many aspects of asexual existence, including their experiences with discrimination. However, the willingness of most LGBTQ+ people to accept asexual people into the community alludes to a general openness, and is beneficial to the asexual community as a whole.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What are your Romantic/Sexual Orientation(s)? Please explain these orientation(s).
2. How/when did you begin to identify this way? How did you discover these label(s)?
3. How has this identity changed your life? What are some notable experiences you have had since adopting this label?
4. Are you “out of the closet” (open about your sexuality) to any non-aseexual people?
 - a. If so, what was it like coming out? Who did you come out to?
 - b. Have you had any notable positive or negative experiences?
5. As an asexual person, do you think of yourself as part of the LGBTQ+ community?
6. Have you attended any LGBTQ+ events, like a pride parade?
 - a. Were you ‘out’ as asexual for this event?
 - b. If so, how well were you accepted by the community?
7. Are there any online spaces in which you are out and in which you commonly interact with people who are not asexual?
 - a. Do you typically interact more with non-aseexual people who are LGBTQ+ or who are “straight”? How do your interactions differ between these two populations?
 - b. How have your interactions been, overall?
 - c. Have you had any notable positive or negative experiences?
8. Have you noticed a difference in the way you interact with other asexual people versus how you interact with LGBTQ+ people in general?
9. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?
10. Demographics – gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, nationality

Appendix B: Bracketing

INTERVIEW 1

As my first interview, it was a pretty easy one. The participant requested a written interview, which made the process rather simple. Most of the participant's responses seemed to be about what I expected, when they had a response. They hadn't really interacted with the LGBTQ community, or with many people in general. They had a few coming-out experiences, most of which were pretty neutral. It was really interesting that a neutral response was actually taken as a somewhat negative response by the participant. They seemed pretty irritated that no one seemed to care, especially their gay friend, who they expected to understand. They mentioned that their most positive responses were from other ace people (something that I expect to hear a lot, as, in my own experience, ace people are typically very excited to find another ace person). Their parents were the most negative, which I also expected, because parents seem to just be like that for some reason. I feel like maybe, as a homophobic straight person, having a queer child must feel like some sort of curse or failure. However, even though their parents weren't accepting of their identity, they weren't violent or overly hostile. The father suggested that the participant couldn't actually know their own sexual orientation, but was more dismissive than anything, which isn't the worst thing that could have happened. The mother ignored the participant's asexual identity completely, and was more concerned about her child's interest in multiple genders. However, coming out was also the participants only real interaction with people about their orientation, outside of some awful Facebook comments and conversations with their twin, who is also asexual. They made some really interesting points about how their lack of interest in sex made them feel guilty about potentially denying a future partner of something that was "expected" of them. They are struggling to work through that guilt, and it

really hit me that compulsory sexuality, in general, is really harmful to people – especially asexual people, but anyone with any reduced interest in sex, temporary or otherwise – and can lead to a lot of negative psychological effects.

INTERVIEW 2

This interview was surprisingly hard for me, partly because of my anxiety about doing my first actual (non-written) interview, and partly because the research ended up being a lot more emotionally draining than I first realized. Having dealt with a lot of these issues personally, it was really easy to connect with the participant on a personal level, but I was left physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the interview. And he didn't even say that much that should have been upsetting. There was a comment about feeling broken and one about people saying he had a medical disorder, but that was really about it. Hopefully, I'm prepared to deal with the rest of the interviews, now that I know how difficult they may be. I'm not altogether sure what to do about the anxiety, but ideally I will be prepared to deal with any negative feelings that come up during future interviews.

INTERVIEW 3

This participant is actually the only person I've ever spoken to who has been diagnosed with HSDD, despite having interacted with a number of ace people. He identified himself as "clinically asexual" and he didn't seem to have too much of a problem with being diagnosed. The idea that this was a disorder made him feel like it was simply a biological abnormality, and that validated his identity further. It surprised me a lot. I was also shocked when he discussed his mother's reaction, when she said that he was lying about his identity so he could have sex with

women, which is, quite frankly, some heterosexual bullshit. I've been consistently surprised so far with how few ace/lgbtq people the participants know. I interact with so many queer people on a regular basis that it's odd to me that the last few participants have had almost no support system of people with similar experiences. It makes me sad to think that they're so alone.

INTERVIEW 4

This was the first interview with someone on the ace spectrum who wasn't just "asexual" so that was an interesting perspective. Demisexuality is even lesser known than asexuality, so I'm glad I was able to interview a demisexual person. This participant has definitely been the happiest so far, and she was so excited to talk about things that it helped me loosen up a little and I feel like I was able to get more information and actually do a longer interview. It was actually really interesting getting to do this interview just a few days after the last one, as both of the participants were only 18 and had started identifying as ace pretty early on, but also had very different experiences. The last participant (and honestly the two before him) had almost no support system of other lgbtq people, but this participant had a lot of ace and lgbtq friends, as well as being actively involved in the communities both online and in person. She has gone to Pride, she was in a GSA, she reads ace blogs and is active in online chat rooms. She's more engaged in the communities than any participant so far, and it seems to have a really positive effect on her. I've never met someone so excited to talk about asexuality (or so generally happy). She'd had a lot of people say mean things to her because of her identity but all those things seemed to just roll off as stories. Not to say they didn't affect her at all, but she talked way more about her positive experiences than her negative ones, and her good interactions with other ace/lgbtq people seemed to have a much more lasting effect than her bad interactions with others.

INTERVIEW 5

This was another written interview, and those are always a lot easier, especially in terms of anxiety about the interview itself and about the emotional drainage that can happen when people talk about their negative experiences. When I can read it, I have control over how much I read at once, and it's also easier to take myself out of the situation a little more. The most interesting thing about this participant was their description of their self-identification journey, namely how they eventually came to identify as panromantic asexual after first identifying as bisexual, and then demisexual, and then finally pan/ace. It's a really good example of 1. The fluidity of sexuality, and 2. How our perceptions of ourselves can change based on the information we have. This participant's personal identifiers changed as their access to language and information grew, and it made their identity more complex, but likely more accurate to their actual feelings. It was really interesting hearing their description of how they tried to force relationships and attraction before they identified as ace, because that is actually something I never experienced. I recognized my lack of sexual attraction for what it was, despite lacking the terminology, at a very young age, and therefore never tried to be "normal." While I'd heard that people would do a lot to try and fit in, this participant's experiences were the first I'd heard in depth about someone trying to force themselves to fit society's expectations despite their asexuality (or other deviances). This was also the second participant to openly talk about their dislike of sex-based media (advertisements, narrative plots based on sex, etc.) and the first to mention any sort of media erasure of asexuality (the *Riverdale* debacle), so that was really interesting. This participant wasn't from the U.S., unlike the last four, and I was wondering if that might affect their experiences, but a lot of what they talked about was pretty similar.

INTERVIEW 6

Somehow this was the second interview in a row with someone from Europe. This person had a lot to talk about and it was a really good interview. There wasn't a lot that stuck out, other than one comment about not being able to be "casually out" as ace, but there was a lot of really good information, and she presented her ideas a lot more succinctly than a lot of the previous participants. I could tell she put a lot of thought into her answers. Like one participant earlier, she was actively involved in a lot of the community (both the ace community and the lgbtq community) and it was somehow surprising again to see such a positive effect of having a large support system. She also made a really good point around the end that it can be really difficult to notice a lack of something if you never had it, because there's nothing to notice, and that heterosexual people are never really forced to consider their feelings of attraction and sexuality, because they're so "normal" that they don't have to question that others may feel differently.

INTERVIEW 7

The part that really got to me here was the participant's psychiatrist telling her that asexuality doesn't exist. It could have been really devastating for her to hear something so invalidating from a medical professional. It also seemed incredibly unprofessional, considering that the latest version of the DSM does specifically mention that asexuality is a sexual orientation and not a mental illness (or fake). This was the first participant to mention ace rings (although there was one participant who discussed the Ace Day of Visibility and the cards, etc. which fit into a similar category of physical representation of one's identity) and I kind of wish I'd asked the other participants about them. Ace rings are a really nice way to subtly be out to

other aces (or to lgbtq people who know what the rings mean) without outing yourself to every stranger you meet. It's representing yourself and taking pride in your identity without putting yourself in danger, which is really clever. It would also be a really interesting idea to study various forms of "fun" self-representation, which I see a lot of in the asexual community specifically. While these things exist in all of the LGBTQ+, such as pride flags and whatnot, there are a lot of ace identifiers or in-jokes that seem more mutually accepted within the community than in other LGBTQ+ communities, like the cards (ace of spades = aro/ace, ace of hearts = romantic ace, etc), ace rings, cake ("cake is better than sex" and all of the other jokes that come from it), and dragons, among others.

INTERVIEW 8

This was possibly the most interesting interview, because it was the only one I did in person. Every other participant was too far away to meet in person and therefore did an online interview, but this was the only person that actually met with me in public. One of the weirdest parts of the interview was that we were able to be interrupted and were interrupted by others a few times. None of the interruptions were hostile or anything, but they did derail the course of conversation because they distracted one or the other of us every time. This was also one of the most informational interviews, for a handful of reasons. This participant in particular had a lot of anecdotes and was also very aware of her asexuality and its impact on her life, in a way that several participants were not. In general, this was easily one of the best interviews, and coincidentally, it also was the longest. We ended up talking to each other longer than either of us intended, although it wasn't much longer than half an hour, just because we were so invested in the conversation.

INTERVIEW 9

This was a really small interview, with very little information. It was almost disappointing, especially after the last interview was so good. The only thing of note was when she discussed her conflation of sexual attraction to mean emotion in general, and how it really messed up her childhood because she convinced herself she was incapable of feeling any emotions. That was actually a little difficult to read, as it was pretty upsetting, but the rest of the interview was pretty cut and dry and revealed very little.

INTERVIEW 10

There was a lot of interesting stuff in this interview, and I really enjoyed it. The participant had a decent amount to say, although it was still one of the shorter interviews. However, they had a lot of stories and in general it was really good. There was nothing very upsetting, and they had a lot of good perspectives. Their discussion of their roommate who asked a lot of questions about their sexual history was weird (trying to confirm their asexuality by making them prove it? Simply curious? Idk) and I felt bad for them when they mentioned their breakup, but other than that, all their answers were pretty standard.