

A-RESONANCES:

Visual Representations of the Asexual Experience

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ABSTRACT

The most adopted definition of asexuality is simple — does not experience sexual attraction. In reality, however, people who identify as asexual are a very heterogeneous group, and more recognition and representation of this variety is needed. Through the analysis of existing asexual visual representations, this thesis proposes that new opportunities are arising for more nuanced representations that acknowledge the diversity of the asexual experience and help others further understand what asexuality can be.

A small-scale qualitative visual study was conducted to extract symbolic visual elements of online asexual communities. Drawing from those elements, two projects and one experiment were undertaken to explore how visual communication tactics can be used to bring forth more nuanced asexual representations. Two projects propose to associate a broadened understanding of asexuality with the diverse asexual experience in visual representations: *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace* situates asexual possibilities in a broader cultural and historical context through visual storytelling; and *#intimAces* interprets common physical interactions from an asexual perspective, linking asexual/nonsexual intimacy with symbols of asexuality. An experiment of symbol-making for asexual spectrum identities seeks clarifications of the specific definitions, leading to a discussion around identity segmentation and the role of design to bring more fluidity. This thesis concludes by suggesting an inclusion of more nuances and possibilities of asexuality for future asexual visibility and education.

Keywords: asexuality, asexual representation, asexual communities, visual communication, visual study

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INTRODUCTION

“An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” (The Asexual Visibility and Education Network, [AVEN], n.d.) This is the most widely adopted definition of asexuality, a marginalized sexual orientation that is still unknown to or misunderstood by many people. According to Anthony Bogaert’s groundbreaking research published in 2004, about 1% of the world population is asexual, though there have been suggestions that the actual present percentage may be higher (Ray, 2017).

The emergence of the contemporary asexual identity occurred only over two decades ago, when the blog post “My Life as an Amoeba” (O’Reilly, 1997) prompted responses from many asexual people. This inspired the creation of the first online asexual community, “The Haven for the Human Amoeba” in 2000, and the founding of AVEN in 2001. Although offline asexual community gatherings have become more common, the asexual communities are still primarily web-based (Hinderliter, 2013). As of today, AVEN is the largest online asexual community and the centre of asexual education. Over the years, AVEN’s widely-accepted agenda has been effective in reducing discrimination and promoting awareness, including eliminating pathologization by framing asexuality as an orientation, and seeking inclusion in the broader LGBTQ+ community.

According to Andrew C. Hinderliter (2016), the user base of English language online communities like AVEN mainly consists of “people in Anglo-American countries, especially the US, the UK, and Canada” (p.2). Of the very few existing studies on asexual communities in other countries, the research on asexuality in China by Day Wong (2015) and the thesis on asexuality in Japan by Kaisa Lehtonen (2018) have implied that asexual people’s need and motivation for activism may vary a lot in non-western contexts; though the pathologization problem exists in both countries studied.

My personal experience may to a certain degree confirm the need for asexual representations across multiple contexts. I first encountered the definition of asexuality in 2015 in an informational post about sexual minorities on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. My impression was that in the discussion of the post, asexuality was dismissed by most people as a temporary novelty. I was unable to find coherent information about asexuality on the Chinese Internet, partly due to the inconsistency of translations from English sources. In 2017, prompted by a local asexual group’s unnoticed presence at the Sydney Mardi Gras in Australia, I started to remotely observe the major English language online asexual communities including r/asexuality of Reddit, AVEN, and several blogs on Tumblr, where I familiarized myself with their discourse. Throughout the course of my research, I reached out to the local asexual and aromantic community in Vancouver, BC and the New York community during the 2019 World Pride. I also

connected to the Chinese online asexual groups on Douban and WeChat. Based on my interaction with people, I relate more to the Chinese communities because of our shared experiences and cultural background. However, overall I identify more closely with the English Language community discourse because it is where my preliminary understanding of asexuality was shaped and where I have spent the most time online and in real life.

My impression is that asexual visibility has progressed a lot over the past few years especially in the English-language/Western context. Fictional asexual characters in media, self-expressional artwork by asexual people, and informational visibility projects are increasingly informing people of the existence of asexuality and presenting more nuanced representations. The growth of asexual visibility led me to the questions of “what next” — what can be introduced to improve the public literacy of asexuality? And what can I contribute as a visual communication designer and researcher?

To answer these questions, I started a research-creation process based on my personal experience, my observations of the communities, and academic research from various disciplines including psychology, sociology, and queer and feminist studies. My ideas have been predominantly influenced by the queer and feminist approaches to asexuality, which tend to “broaden and pluralize what can ‘count’ as asexuality and how asexuality is defined” (Przybylo, 2019, p.14). This speaks to my long time aspiration to find alternative ways to explain what asexuality is without depending on the current AVEN definition, because I was unable to make sense of it in the first place. The consensus of the community is that the AVEN definition mainly functions as a way of explaining asexuality to non-asexuals while, in actuality, the highly diverse communities operate in a more inclusive way and welcome self-identified individuals (Hinderliter, 2009; Chasin, 2013, p.405). While it is acknowledged that the external definition has a function in activism, I believe that there is a lack of subtlety that poses a barrier for potential members who would identify with the communities but feel excluded by this one sentence. This is where visual representations can help to deliver more nuanced information and improve the public understanding of the asexual experience. In this thesis, I draw the word “resonance” from the “asexual resonances” methodology proposed by Przybylo and Cooper (2014) to represent the nuanced feelings, moments, and possibilities that resonate with asexual people but exist in a form outside the traditional definition.

This thesis begins by examining existing forms and content of asexual visual representations, through which I extract the major symbolic visual elements and suggest opportunities for future development of asexual visibility and education. I propose two ways in which visual communication tactics can be employed to bring forth more nuanced asexual representations: *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace*, which locates the resonance of asexual identities in a historical context and reconstructs it for visual storytelling; and

#intimAces, which visualizes the resonance of asexual feelings behind everyday nonsexual interactions using symbols characteristic of asexual communities. Both projects are focused on presenting asexual possibilities rather than concrete definitions. I then contrast this exploration of nuanced representations with an experiment in making specific symbols for the sub-identities on the asexual spectrum, and discuss their potential utility and limitations. I conclude by considering future possibilities for asexual visibility projects that could increase resonances of the asexual experience in the public sphere with more community participation and more consideration of different cultures.

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ASEXUALITY

This section examines visual trends within the online asexual communities and the asexual visual representations in different mediums. Part I investigates the popular visual elements that asexual people use to represent their identity. Part II explores the central message of existing asexual visual representations and suggests new opportunities for the future visibility projects.

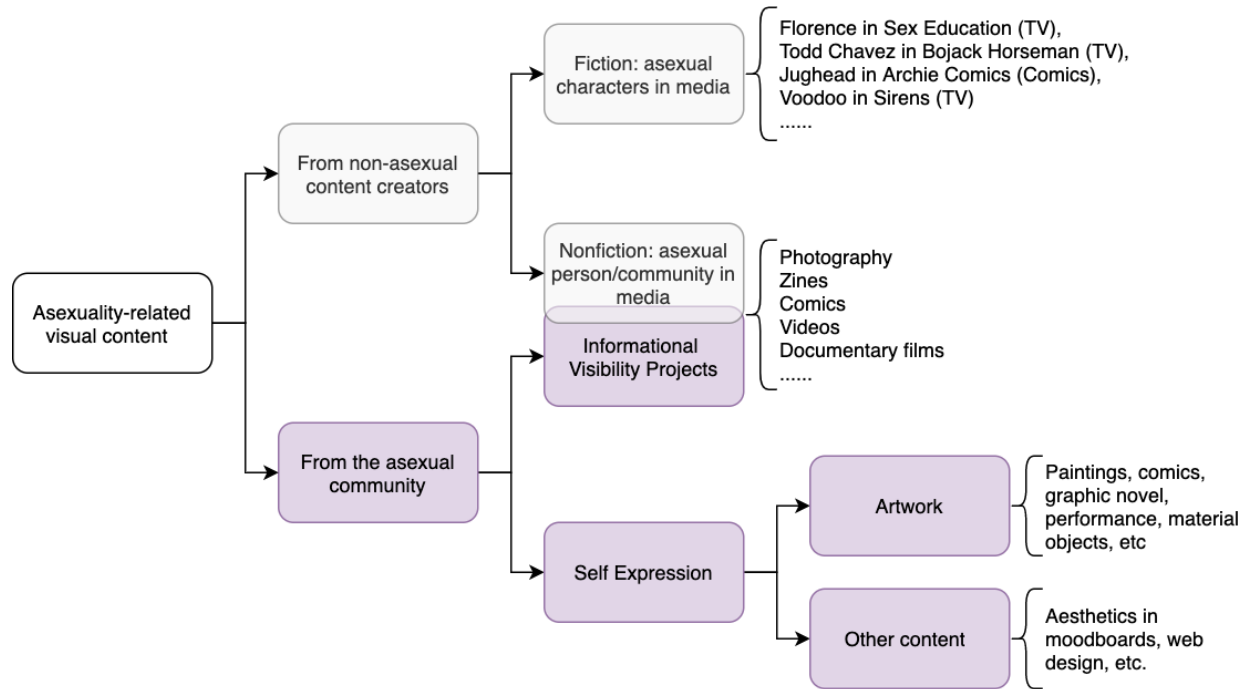


Figure 1. Diagram of asexuality-related visual content.

I. Visual Study

Visual content related to asexuality (see Figure 1) can be divided into two categories: 1) content from non-asexual content creators (i.e. not specifically indicated to be asexual), including fictional asexual characters and the presence of asexual people in media; and 2) content from the asexual community, including informational visibility projects, and asexual people's self-expressional artwork and aesthetics. I consider the content from the second category to be more helpful for the search of symbolic visual elements, because asexual creators are usually more aware of the shifts of the insider language.

The informational visibility projects from the community are fundamentally intended for public education, which may overlap with the first category in the case where asexual people were actively

involved in the production process. Asexual people's self-expressional work are less explicit in their message and more focused on the aesthetics. They are largely influenced by individual visual styles. The projects take various forms and mediums from photography, illustrations, material artefacts, to animations, videos, and documentary films (see Figure 2-7). Many apply the representational symbols that are widely-acknowledged by the asexual communities: "the asexual flag", "cake", "ace of spade / ace of heart"¹, and "ace ring"². Their history can be traced back to the last decade, according to the "Symbols of Asexuality" page on the AVENwiki (n.d.), last updated in 2013. From my participation in the asexual communities, I also noticed a few other themes and elements that appear frequently but have not yet received such formal recognition.

To search for the characteristic symbols of asexuality, and to build a preliminary understanding of the visual culture of the asexual communities, I adopted a quantitative method referred to as "content analysis" (Muratovski, 2015, p.165-168) whereby I collected and examined data from Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking website centred around visual contents. The choice of this platform was based on its asexual user activity and design — Tumblr is a main space for online asexual discourse. According to the Asexual Awareness Week Community Census in 2011, it has surpassed AVEN in terms of the proportion of participation from the asexual communities (Miller, 2011). Tumblr favours recent and popular posts, which helps filter outdated content; and in contrast to Instagram, it encourages reblogging and multi-keyword searching, thus facilitating the discovery of quality content. The data collected consists of the top 30 search results for each of the selected keywords: "asexuality", "asexual art" and "asexual aesthetic", filtered by the "most popular" option. All-text posts and posts with irrelevant visuals were skipped during the data collection³.

The search results (see Appendix B) covered the recent asexual representations in media, asexual people's artwork and photos, and a variety of "moodboards" — a popular type of content on Tumblr not limited to the asexual community. Although the popularity of visual elements varies in the different types of content, some elements are consistent in all three sets of data and are identifiable in the community discourse (see Table 1). Except for the dominant "asexual flag" colour palette, the acknowledged symbols ("cake", "ace of spade / ace of heart", "ace ring") actually have lower rankings on the list than the following elements:

¹ Some advise to specifically use "ace of heart" for romantic asexual and "ace of spade" for aromantic asexual, but it has not been widely-accepted. I have also seen a few cases using ace of club / diamond to represent asexuality.

² Black rings that some asexual people wear on their right middle fingers.

³ Posts that use common meme pictures or display the same objects in different LGBTQ+ flag colours are considered irrelevant to the asexual communities' visual identity. All searches were conducted on Feb 7, 2020.

Element	Percentage
Asexual flag	77.78%
Space	16.67%
Plant	16.67%
Fictional asexual characters in media	14.44%
Original asexual characters	12.22%
Asexual celebrities/activists	6.67%
Recreated fictional characters in ace theme	6.67%
Ace of spade / ace of heart	5.56%
Dragon	4.44%
Cake	3.33%
Ace ring	2.22%

Table 1. The appearances of representational elements among all search results.

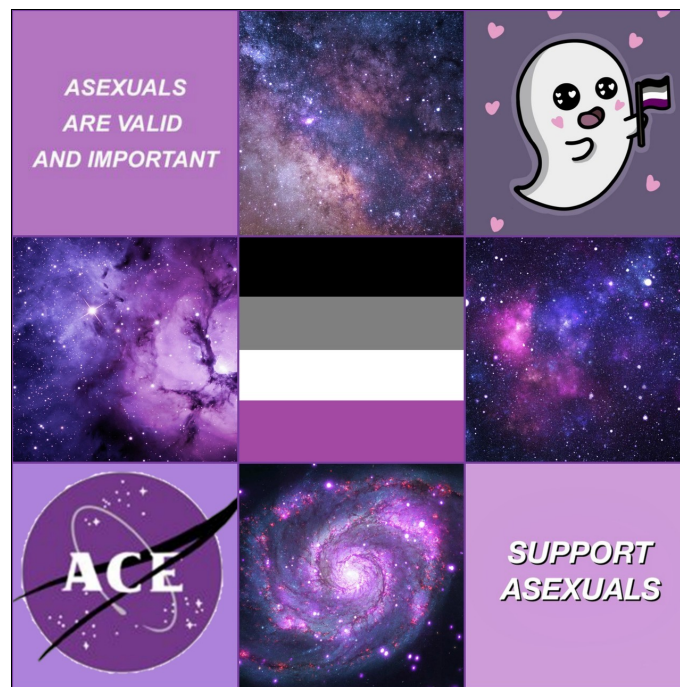


Figure 2. A space themed moodboard. By moodboards-for-fun, 2018, <https://moodboards-for-fun.tumblr.com/post/175008079676/asexual-positivity-with-purple-and-space-themes-i>. Used by permission of the artist.

“Space” is a common theme of asexual-themed moodboards (see Figure 2) and illustrations. A few possible explanations of its origin are that: 1) the word rhymes with “ace”, short for asexual; 2) the images

of astronauts and aliens are a humorous response to people who consider asexual people as strange beings; and 3) “space ace” is the name of a video game and the nickname some asexual people adopt for themselves, according to a AVEN forum thread by user Mike-95 (2018).

On her illustration of an asexual character standing with leaves in the background (see Figure 3), Tumblr user addled-artist (2020) writes: “Yes. I am asexual. No. I am not a plant.” “Plant” is more of an “anti-symbol” in response to some non-asexual people mockingly associating asexuality with the asexual reproduction of plants. It is mostly used alongside original asexual characters in illustrations that promote asexual positivity.



Left: Figure 3. From ‘Yes I am asexual, no I am not a plant’, by addled-artist, 2020, <https://addled-artist.tumblr.com/post/190193920715/yes-i-am-asexual-no-i-am-not-a-plant>. Used by permission of the artist.

Right: Figure 4. From *Ace Pride Dragon*, by Loes Oldhoff, 2019, <https://sundewsart.tumblr.com/post/174576070488/rolls-out-of-the-bushes-hey-did-someone-say>. Used by permission of the artist.

“Dragon” is a mascot of the asexual community (much like the “unicorn” of the larger LGBTQ+ community) (see Figure 4) and most community discussions have pinpointed its origin to Tumblr. The reason given for the dragon is “partially [be]cause asexuals and dragons are both considered mythical, fearsome creatures who like shiny things and cake”, according to the blog Asexual Advice (Kiowa, 2015).

The three visual elements are meaningful symbols of asexuality and have been well-received by the asexual community on Tumblr, which also aligns with my impression of the general online asexual community discourse. Their sources indicate some misconceptions and stigmatizations against the asexual community but also reflect a sense of positivity that asexual people have in response. Interestingly, popular as they are on Tumblr and other main online asexual platforms, I have never seen any of them being used in the Chinese asexual communities. One reason might be that their linguistic and cultural roots are exclusive to the English language discourse. Unlike “ace of spade” which is an English pun but known to the Chinese communities, the three elements are not acknowledged and consequently not included when people translate materials from AVEN. This may reflect how much non-English asexual communities have diverged from the AVEN-centric English language discourse.

While “space”, “plant” and “dragon” have been circulated in the communities for years, other elements that emerged in the search are more recent and prone to fading over time. Among screenshots of the fictional asexual characters in media, Florence from the TV series *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019-2020) has been the community’s new favourite since her appearance in January 2020. Fictional characters whose asexual tendencies are frequently discussed, like Aziraphale and Crowley from miniseries *Good Omens* (Gaiman & Pratchett, 2019), are seen painted with asexual flag colours. Many are also paying attention to news about asexual activists and celebrities.

This qualitative study provides preliminary insights of the popular themes and elements that represent the asexual communities. It does have some limitations. First, Tumblr’s user base is relatively young, and so the percentages of theme popularity may not mirror other platforms. For instance, some on Reddit were not aware of the use of dragon outside Tumblr and consider it “infantilizing” (u/dragon-storyteller, 2015). Second, the sample is small and contains multiple posts from a few of the same blogs, which means the aesthetic preferences of the bloggers can influence the results. Finally, the data analysis was dependent upon my subjective interpretation. Future research may consider taking a more efficient and objective approach and analyze more data across different platforms.

II. Trend Analysis

To explore the future opportunities for asexual representations, it would be helpful to first understand what knowledge and messages the existing projects have brought to the public. Looking back at the diagram of visual contents (see Figure 1), the most accessible contents to those outside the asexual communities are the first category (fictional characters and real community in media) and other

informational visibility projects. Rather than running a quantitative analysis, I opted to do a close reading on a few well-known examples in each category. I feel that this gives a good sense of where the representations are trending.

There are few asexual-identified fictional characters in popular culture and fewer still that have been properly articulated. Currently, the most popular ones in the asexual communities are Florence from *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019-present) and Todd Chavez from *Bojack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020) (see Figure 5). The story of Florence struggling to figure out her asexuality resonates with many community members and delivers the positive message that asexual people are not broken and may develop romantic relationships with others. The portrayal of asexuality in *Bojack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020) was groundbreaking because it had a multi-season arc about Todd coming to terms with his asexuality and connecting to other asexual people. However, critics have pointed out that most prominent asexual representations in media are heteroromantic, creating “a false and damaging narrative that asexuality is heterosexuality-lite, instead of being a completely separate experience” (Ghaleb, 2018). There is a need for more diverse asexual representations with different genders and ethnicities. During my content analysis of the Tumblr community, I found 6 out of 10 original asexual characters in the illustrations are people of colour, which corresponds with the recent emphasis on intersectionality in the community discourse.



Figure 5. From *Todd Chavez: Amazing Asexual*, by Audra Cohen, 2019. <https://itsaaudraw.tumblr.com/post/174640057172/todd-chavez-is-a-fucking-icon-and-i-love-him-so>. Used by permission of the artist.



Figure 6. Good Omens fan art. By Sobre, 2019, <https://lejoursobre.tumblr.com/post/189707690008/i-just-wanted-to-say-that-neil-gaimans-tweets>. Used by permission of the artist.

While openly asexual characters are rare, the asexual communities also welcome characters with asexual tendencies. Many early examples were either stereotypically cold-blooded loners or latter written to be “cured” by entering heteronormative relationships. In contrast, the two main characters in *Good Omens* (Gaiman & Pratchett, 2019) and their relationship’s queerly asexual nature are not only embraced by asexual people (see Figure 6) but endorsed by the creator Neil Gaiman (2019) on Twitter: “I wouldn’t exclude the ideas that they are ace, or aromantic, or trans...Whatever Crowley and Aziraphale are, it’s a love story.” It is great to see such good representation of an emotionally intimate asexual relationship; but because it is still facing accusations of “queerbaiting”⁴, obviously asexual visibility and education still has a long way to go. A review by Erin Hart (2019) speaks to the portrayal in this way:

In our sex-steeped culture, the idea that deep, devoted love does not have to involve sex is unfathomable. It’s why the very existence of asexuality is questioned. It’s why we have phrases like “just friends” and “friendzone,” implying that even the closest friendship, lacking that physical component, will always be on a level below. *Good Omens* could have bought into that idea. It didn’t, and that’s what makes it groundbreaking.

⁴ A marketing technique usually seen in film and TV series: to hint at but not actually depict same-sex romance in order to attract a queer audience while attempting to avoid alienating other consumers.

Aside from fictional representations, actual asexual community members have also been gaining more exposure in public. For a long time, the mainstream media and other non-asexual creators tended to impose certain narratives on their asexual subjects in a negative or biased way. Early examples include a few notorious television talk shows about asexuality in 2006 (*The Montel Williams show*, *The View*, and *The Situation*), in which a few AVEN members “are met with reactions of incredulity by the interviewer or they are pathologized and further ostracized for the sake of sensationalization” (Cerankowski, 2014, p.140). The documentary (*A*)sexual (Tucker, 2011), though serving as a successful educational tool, features David Jay (founder of AVEN, asexual activist) as a cisgender male and problematically demonstrates his asexuality movement as predominately white (Sheehan, 2015, p.78). Some more recent projects were met with mixed community receptions despite attention to gender/race diversity and avoiding “exceptionalizing” certain members: many considers the portrayal of asexual people as “depressed” in the multimedia web-doc *Asexuals Project* (Abril, 2013-n.d.)⁵; the BBC Three documentary *I Don't Want Sex: Asexual & Looking For Love* (2018) faces similar criticism of selectively presenting “the ‘lonely asexual’ trope” (Benoit, 2019).

For creators outside the asexual communities, perhaps the key to responsible asexual representations is to drop assumptions and to further involve asexual people in the creative process. Although a familiar narrative of vulnerable asexual people failing to pursue companionship may help the public recognize their struggles, it unfairly leaves out many other asexual people. News media like HuffPost and Vice gives voice to happy asexual people of different romantic orientations and relationship status (e.g. Mirchandani, 2020; Sonoma, 2019; Borresen, 2018). The new documentary, *ASEXUALS* (2019)⁶, shifts the focus away from the lives of asexual individuals to the asexual community’s collective activism efforts with considerations about intersectionality. According to the filmmaker Carmelo (2018), two of the co-producers are active members of their local asexual communities, and the production team is well aware of the communities’ need for diversity in representation.

Besides working with the mainstream media and interested individuals outside the communities, many asexual people have been dedicated to creating their own visibility and education projects. One of the earliest examples is Julia Sondra Decker’s YouTube series, *The Asexuality Top Ten* (2008), debunking misunderstandings about asexuality. Nowadays, many asexual influencers and activists on YouTube (e.g. Echo Gillette, ChandlerNWilson, Yasmin Benoit, AmeliaAce, Slice of Ace) have come forth to share their

⁵ At the time of writing this thesis, Abril has removed the project from her personal website, although a part of the content can still be accessed on her Vimeo channel and in the BuzzFeed article (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/gabrielsanchez/heres-what-its-like-to-identify-as-asexual>).

⁶ The film is not yet officially released, but there have allegedly been offline screenings in different local communities. I am speaking to the version that premiered on June 28, 2019 during the NYC World Pride.

knowledge, life experiences, and critiques of mainstream culture to the public sphere. Self-media is not the only platform for asexual creators. The video art piece *Ace of Baes* by asexual artist Emie // Eva-Marie Elg (2016-2019) is showing both online and in offline film festivals, featuring a highly diverse group of casts talking in-depth about the prejudice they face from various cultural backgrounds (see Figure 7). In its Intro, as the members show their faces in close-up, their identity labels emerge: “fluid ace”, “ace aro”, “ace homoromantic”, “demisexual”, and “queer ace”, giving visibility to the underrepresented sub-identities on the asexual spectrum.



Figure 7. Screenshot of the trailer. From *Ace of Baes playlist*, by Emie // Eva-Marie Elg, 2016-2019. Happy Endings Productions Ltd, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmJdV5_6y3cGhGOjrTX9qSlelrq7wSMUd.

Used by permission of the artist.

From fictional asexual characters to real world asexual communities in media, asexuality is gaining more public visibility and there is a general trend of more nuanced asexual representations. There has been an evident emphasis on intersectionality in the asexual communities and in the broader public discourse. Gone are the days when asexual visibility was relying on a few “unassailable asexuals” who came from a relatively normative and privileged position in order to avoid pathologization; future representations shall be more inclusive of race, gender, disability, and even the temporality of asexuality in their discussions. Asexual education has also evolved from “what asexuality is or isn’t” to “what asexuality can be”. The growth of self-media and asexual awareness in creative disciplines has enabled more asexual individuals to

share their multifaceted experiences and offer critiques of the norms in popular culture. The portrayal of asexual relationships, both in fiction and in real life, not only empowers asexual people but also broadens the public's understanding of love and intimacy. With such transitions into nuances, future asexual representations may further give visibility to asexuality and its resonances in everyday life.

The portrayal of asexual people in media has a rather problematic history, but the asexual communities have been gaining more authority to display the underrepresented parts of the asexual spectrum. I conclude that future visibility projects should develop more nuanced representations of asexuality and its resonances. In the following sections, I will discuss different methods to bring forth these nuanced representations using visual communication tactics.

A-RESONANCE IN HISTORY: ANDY WARHOL IS ARO ACE

Andy Warhol is Aro Ace is a poster series that locates resonances of asexuality in a historical context before the emergence of contemporary asexual identities. Printed in the colours of asexual and aromantic flags, the famous artist's portraits were overlaid with quotes attributed to Warhol that reflect feelings asexual and aromantic people may experience in their lives: intimation, confusion, and self-doubt. The project makes a radical attempt to reframe what is considered "philosophy" in Warhol's opinions about sex to the common practice of asexuals, in the hope that it can improve the public's understandings of asexuality.

Andy Warhol was a leading figure of the pop art movement who was also known as a queer icon. Many have analyzed his record of sexual behaviours and erotic preferences and the general agreement was that "Warhol was a gay man who had several partners throughout his life" (The Andy Warhol Museum, n.d.). This view is supported by testimonies from his past romantic partners and the distinct homoeroticism in his art. A few sources associate him with the word "asexual", mostly in the context of eagerly contesting rather than confirming it (e.g. Gopnik, 2018; Trebay & Ferla, 2018); and when it is affirmative, it mainly speaks to his lack of sexual behaviour (Lavin, 2018). Evidence shows that Warhol did practice celibacy, which includes his approval of the message "Andy Warhol is a virgin" as well as relevant comments from people in his circle (Kahan, 2013). Kahan identifies this as the tradition of "philosophical bachelorhood" (p.127), which was practiced by great philosophers as a counternormative lifestyle of social freedom and new styles of governance.

Apart from all the analysis above, little interpretation has been made of how Warhol *felt* about sex, which would be key to understanding one's (supposed) asexuality today. The most-adopted definition of asexuality — "not experiencing sexual attraction" (AVEN) — is based on attraction rather than behaviour or preference. In fact, asexual people may partake in sexual activities and may have preferences of certain genders without desiring any sexual contact; grey-asexual people can experience some degree of sexual attraction while still being on the asexual spectrum (Chasin, 2013, p.406). The intention of listing the above characteristics is not to counter-argue that Warhol was more possibly asexual than homosexual; rather, it is to suggest that his acknowledged homosexuality may coexist with asexual *possibilities*, which can be found in his feelings, as illustrated by himself in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (2010):

Funny people are the only people I ever get really interested in, [...] But if the big attraction for you is having somebody be funny, you run into a problem, because being funny is not being sexy, so in the end, near the moment of truth, you're not really attracted, you can't really "do it". (p.49)

After being alive, the next hardest work is having sex. Of course, for some people it isn't work because they need the exercise and they've got the energy for the sex and the sex gives them more

energy. Some people get energy from sex and some people lose energy from sex. I have found that it's too much work. [...] As I said, I'm an energy-loser. (p. 97)

According to Warhol, he was only attracted to “funny people”, but this attraction was not sexual. It also appears that he conducted a cost-benefit analysis of having sex, and decided that the cost outweighs the gains. This can apply to what many asexual people feel: unlike people who gain a sense of fulfillment from sex, there is no (or not enough) attraction to entice them to fulfillment in the first place.

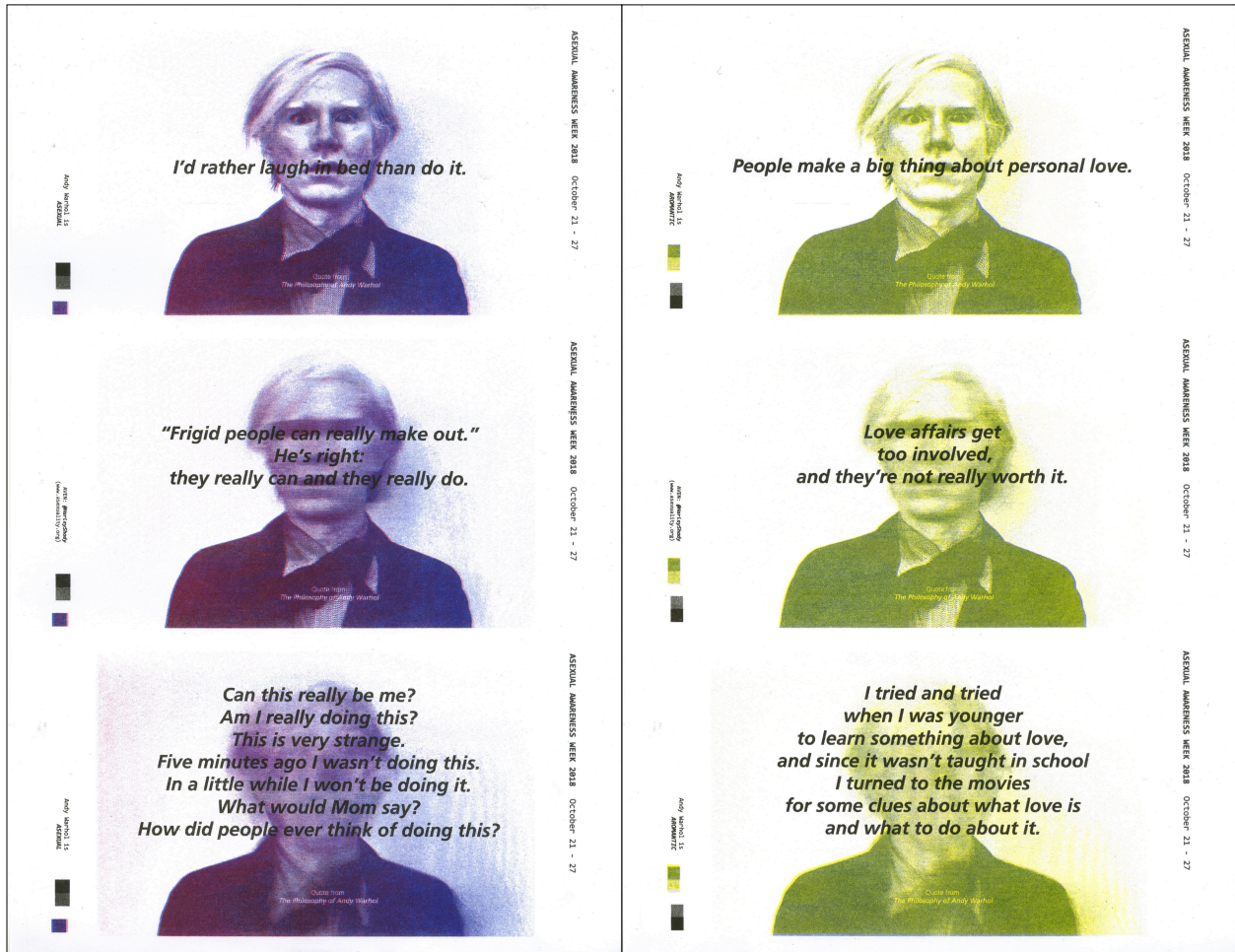


Figure 8. From *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace*, by Renrong Guo, 2018. Print, 11 x 17 inch.
Copyright 2018 by R. Guo.

Multiple instances of feelings like this can be found in this book, including the following quotes that were selected for the poster design (see Figure 8). “I’d rather laugh in bed than do it” (p.49) concludes Warhol’s discussion on his attraction type and parallels with the asexual communities’ adoption of cake as an informal symbol (what people would rather have than sex). “Frigid people can really make out.’ He’s right: they really can and they really do.” (p. 58) Little context was provided in the book, but the paragraph can

be used to explain that some asexual people are open to sexual intimacy, if not taking the word “frigid” literally. Warhol also stated that he belonged to the type of people who “can never let their minds go blank and fill up with the sex” and resorted to humour to relax. His depiction of the thoughts during sex is comparable to a state of dissociation from the body that many asexual people have reported experiencing (Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, & Enzlin, 2015): “Can this really be me? Am I really doing this?”(p. 48)

Similarly, parallels can be drawn between Warhol’s attitude to “personal love” (p.47) and aromantic feelings. The second poster presents three quotes that reflect his dismissal and confusion. The concept of being aromantic originated to differentiate between asexual people who have or don’t have romantic attractions to others; despite being independent from asexuality (meaning that one can be aromantic without being asexual), it is an important part of the asexual discourse.

The selection and layout of the quotes were partly based on the choice of the artist’s portraits, *Andy Warhol* (1972) by Duane Michals. It is Michals’ distinct style to use sequences of images to build narratives, which include blurred out frames to represent motion. In the first frame, Warhol is still and staring into the camera with a look of surprise and defensiveness. The second one shows that he is shaking his head horizontally, as if out of disapproval. The motion in the last one is further chaotic and delivers a sense of confusion. This sequence of emotion poses an interesting contrast to the assertiveness and confidence that the Warhol we are generally presented usually carries.

By matching the tones of the texts with the emotions embedded in the pictures, I created a narrative of asexual and aromantic people’s experience when trying to figure out their identities: initial intimation that they run counter to the world they interact with; confusion during their efforts to “blend in”; and the subsequent self-doubt that hopefully leads to the eventual realization of their asexuality. It illustrates the struggles that asexual people may go through in a society where they are marginalized and underrepresented. This narrative of self-questioning corresponds to part of the typical trajectory of asexual people coming to their identity (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

The project was intended to start conversations both in and out of the asexual communities about my interpretations of Warhol’s asexuality. This idea originated when I was reading *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* for the first time and was surprised by how it corresponded with my personal experience. My initial attempt was to make a post on AVEN, “Is Andy Warhol asexual?” (2018), which received a limited response. In the poster design, I attached my AVEN username on the side, hoping that the discussion in my post might continue. The posters were shown on campus during the 2018 Asexual Awareness Week, and exhibited at “Imagining Asexuality: Making Asexual Cultures and Archives” group exhibition in April

2019. The feedback from outside the asexual communities was consistent: people had not known about this aspect of Warhol before and found it interesting. The comments from the asexual communities both in my post and during the exhibition were more divided. Apart from those expressing general interest, there was an oft-repeated concern (Figure 9): “Andy Warhol was the one who knows and he is dead.”

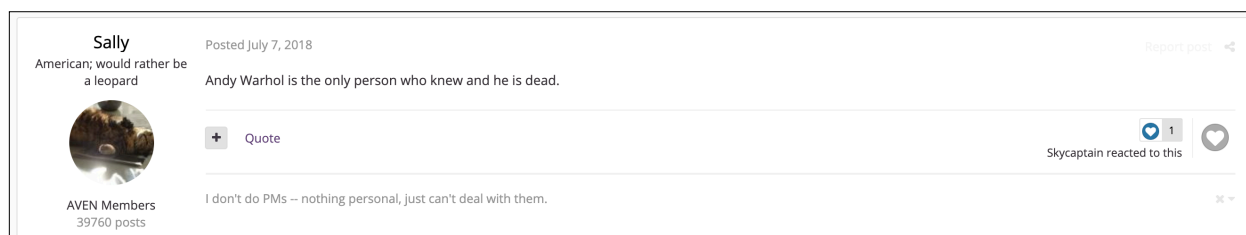


Figure 9. A comment by user Sally on my AVEN post.

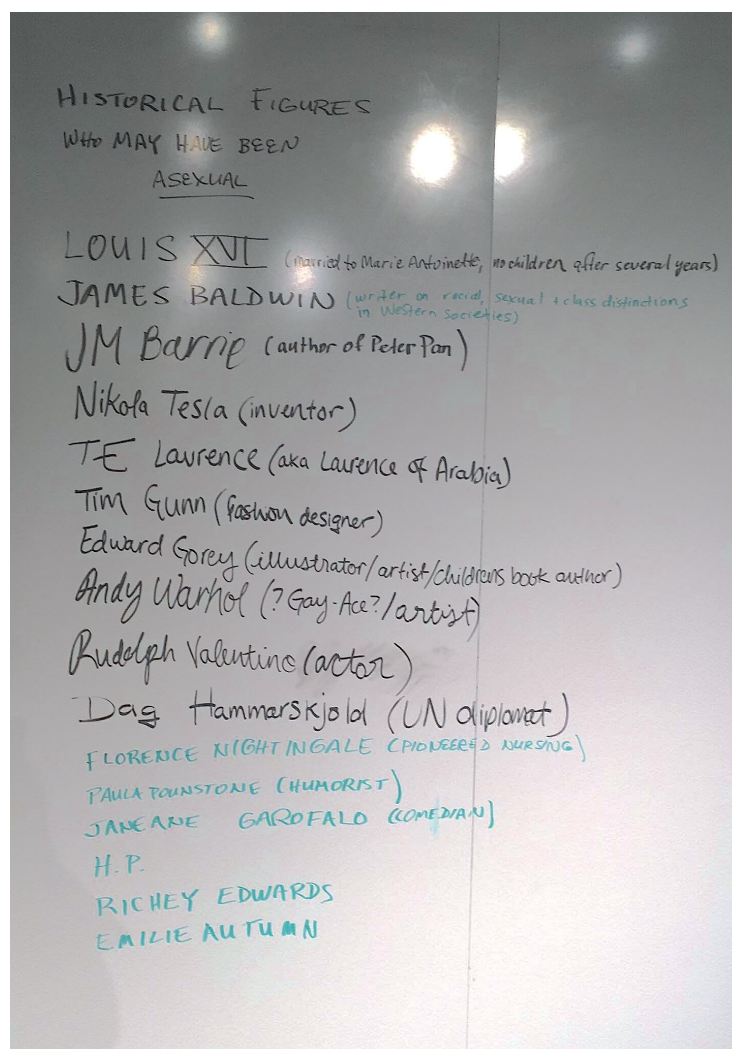


Figure 10. Warhol was listed on the whiteboard of the “Ace History” panel at the 2019 Ace & Aro Conference.
Photo by Renrong Guo, 2019.

This concern reflects a common ethos in the asexual communities that emphasizes self-identification (Chasin, 2015, p.175). It also speaks to the part of identity politics that discourages speculations about others. Nonetheless, it is an inevitable step when approaching queer history. The rise of contemporary asexual identities was merely two decades ago, and the importance of having historical representations prior to that has not been dismissed by the majority of the communities. My reading of Andy Warhol was later echoed in the communities when he was listed as a possible candidate among other historical figures at the “Ace History” panel of the 2019 Ace & Aro Conference in New York (see Figure 10).

Before this project, some asexual bloggers on Tumblr started the quest to build “a canon of asexual history”. They avoid claiming a deceased person as definitely asexual, due to the difficulty in differentiating between asexuality and celibacy (another common concern in the communities). Instead, they examine the abstract meaning of past texts that “might link to modern conceptions of asexuality” (Waters, 2018). In academia, from queer and feminist perspectives, Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper (2014) developed the method “asexual resonances” that takes the search to a broader scope. What can be considered as asexual resonances are not limited by definitional parameters, including self-identification and the distinction from celibacy. As a result, a blurry image of asexuality can be found in not only historical figures with certain lifestyles or aesthetics but macro-scale phenomena like political feminist movements (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014).

Following the interpretation the asexual possibilities and resonances, there is much potential to expand and produce new meanings from the information within its communication. “Language and systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination.” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p.13) In *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace*, the composition of Warhol’s pictures, selected quotes, and the flag colours was able to deliver Warhol’s asexual possibilities without explanations through words; it also constructed a narrative of self-doubts — going against one’s instincts to fit into relational normativity — which contradicts the well-known confident image of Warhol and might in turn inspire curiosity and empathy in the non-asexual audience. The narrative/reality contrast can also be understood in the opposite way as an inspiration for asexual people. The asexual thoughts and feelings behind Warhol’s quotes may emerge in the lives of many and are often unfavored and marginalized by the public and doubted by asexual people themselves. However, these thoughts and feelings are what support the philosophy that Warhol once lived and told with pride.

This project exemplifies that through the composition of words, images, and other visual elements, visual representation of asexuality can deliver and expand historical asexual possibilities with narratives, and

effectively address both asexual and non-asexual audiences with knowledge beyond definitions. As more asexual figures and resonances are discovered and presented, the aesthetics and the narrative potential can be further developed.

In conclusion, *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace* is an experiment in reading and visually communicating the asexual possibilities in history to improve people's understanding of asexuality. The first stage of the project examines Warhol's feeling towards sex embedded in his philosophy, and found multiple parallels with asexuality. The second stage arranged selected quotes and visual elements to create a narrative, associating Warhol's philosophy directly with asexual people's feelings and conveying layered meanings to different audiences. Through exploring Warhol's asexual possibilities, feeling, and philosophy, I gained a deeper understanding of the diversity of the asexual discourse. This inspired me to explore the feelings and life philosophies within the current communities in the next project, *#intimAces*.

A-RESONANCE IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS: #INTIMACES

#intimAces is an animation series that interprets brief moments of bodily contacts between two people, from an asexual perspective. The gestures between two people in abstract silhouettes are precisely examined for intricate feelings — aversion, acceptance, or craving — which are highlighted by metaphorical visual effects. The series aims to display the diversity and complexity of asexual people's feelings about common nonsexual physical contacts, and to explore intimacy beyond the paradigms of sexual and romantic relationships.

One way that the heterogeneity of the asexual communities manifests is in how people experience relationships and intimacy: being repulsed, indifferent, or positive to sex; falling on a spectrum from experiencing low level of sexual attraction to none; being romantically attracted to certain genders, or aromantic. Asexual people have different attitudes and need of physical contacts with others, which often comes up in the community discussions. For example, in a post on r/asexuality of Reddit, u/Luthyx (2019) and commenters claimed to be “touch-averse” and frustrated by families and friends who ignore their boundaries. In another post, u/jmak456 (2019) expressed his craving for physical affection i.e. “touch starvation” and the struggles to fulfill it while being aromantic asexual, which was echoed by the comments from both aromantic and non-aromantic asexuals. During the “Cuddling & Nonsexual Intimacy” session at the 2019 Ace & Aro Conference in New York, I spoke with four aromantic asexual people as a group (outnumbered by over twenty romantic and questioning asexuals). Despite the small sample, their experiences differed from one another; aside from “touch aversion” and “touch starvation”, two were in the middle ground and would enjoy or seek cuddling or other specific forms of intimacy from certain people. There was a mutual understanding that an aromantic asexual's ideal physical intimacy is often read differently by others and the social norms, which also applies to the general asexual communities to some degree.

Inspired by the discussions around physical contacts and intimacy in the asexual communities, *#intimAces* provides an asexual interpretation of bodily interactions as an alternative to the social norms. The series uses the signature colour palette of the asexual flag. Between the black and white silhouettes on the grey background, the colour of purple takes different shapes to represent the feelings behind the gestures. It consists of four short looping animations: *#hugged*, *#hugging*, *#lean-on*, and *#shoulder-pat*.

The first two clips (see Figure 11-12) speak to two polarized ways in which asexual people experience hugs. For touch-averse people, common social interactions like hugs make their skin crawl. In *#hugged*, this feeling is visualized by a wiggling mark that shows the spinning purple night sky — “space”, a symbolic

element in online asexual communities. *#hugging* compares how touch-starved people need physical intimacy to “recharge the battery” — the blinking figure turns less transparent as they hug the other one.



Figure 11. Keyframes of *#hugged*. From *#intimAces*, by Renrong Guo, 2019. Animation.
<https://vimeo.com/327890520>. Copyright 2019 by R. Guo.



Figure 12. Keyframes of *#hugging*. From *#intimAces*, by Renrong Guo, 2019. Animation.
<https://vimeo.com/328100954>. Copyright 2019 by R. Guo.

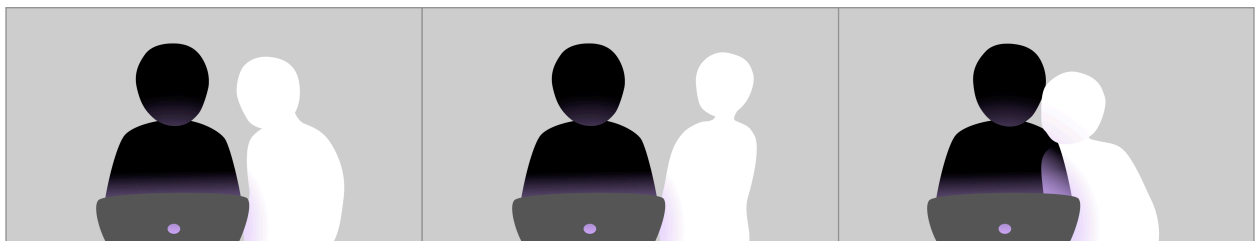


Figure 13. Keyframes of *#lean-on*. From *#intimAces*, by Renrong Guo, 2019. Animation.
<https://vimeo.com/356826570>. Copyright 2019 by R. Guo.

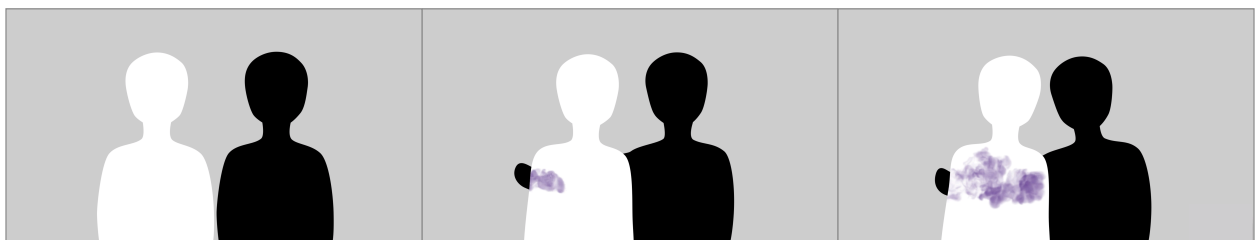


Figure 14. Keyframes of *#shoulder-pat*. From *#intimAces*, by Renrong Guo, 2019. Animation.
<https://vimeo.com/356826810>. Copyright 2019 by R. Guo.

#lean-on and *#shoulder-pat* (see Figure 13-14) are about the more nuanced situations in the middle ground, based on my observations of the daily life as an asexual person. The actions can convey different meanings in different types of relationships, but generally they are more intimate than hugs. The animations are focused on the relations between two people rather than one-sided feelings. In *#lean-on*,

the light from the screen glows through the overlapping of the two figures, which parallels with their gestures of trust and interdependency. In *#shoulder-pat*, the smoke spreads across one's shoulder as their connection elevates and grows because of the act of approval and appreciation.

In all four clips, the silhouettes of the figures were designed to be abstract, leaving out any feature that may remind people of specific types of relationships. In this way, the series is able to reach everyone with their own experience of these interactions. More importantly, when there is no clue to understand these interactions by social norms or stereotypes, the audience is actually looking through the perspective of asexual people: There is no script to define how they experience intimacy; what really matters is the genuine feelings and the meaningful connections they share with others.

In the future, this project could be deployed in a few different ways to enhance discussions of asexual and nonsexual intimacy: 1) campaign for asexual visibility; 2) communicative toolkit for people to negotiate boundaries and preferences in relationships; 3) commentary on asexual and nonsexual intimacy in media.

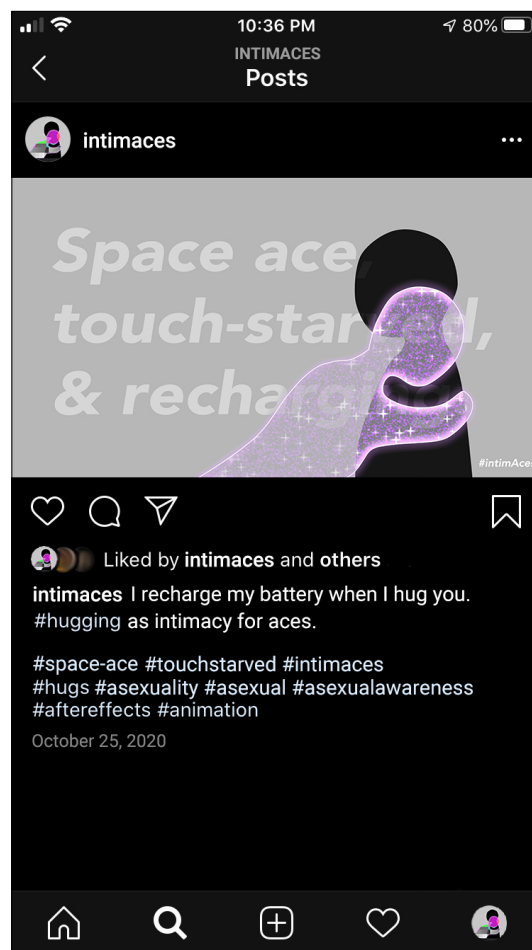
#intimAces for asexual visibility

There is a common misconception that asexuals are “missing out” on invaluable life experiences of having intimate relationships with others, which stems from society's strong association of intimacy with sex. In asexuality studies, the concept of compulsory sexuality is articulated as the assumption that being sexual is natural and normal in a way that undermines asexual and nonsexual lives, relationships, and identities (Gupta, 2015; Przybylo, 2019). Asexual activists have been working to challenge such assumption, claiming that asexual people are as capable as non-asexuals of building deep emotional connections to others. “There is a pretty strong case we make that not all important relationships are sexual, and not all intimacy on an emotional level is necessarily sexual,” says David Jay in an interview on asexual intimacy (White & Jay, 2009). Jay (2009) provided many examples of how asexual people may approach intimacy: in romantic relationships, close partnerships or friendships; through community-building; internally, with themselves; with nature; or in religious practices. From the interviews of 30 asexual individuals, Kristina Gupta (2017) found that “by valuing friendships and aloneness, a number of the interviewees challenged the idea that it is necessary to have a sexual or romantic partnership to enjoy a complete and fulfilling life” (p.1005).

As sympathetic visual representations of asexual and nonsexual intimacy, *#intimAces* (2019) has showed its potential in visualizing how asexual people may connect with others and challenging compulsory sexuality. In an asexual visibility campaign, the series could take up a more radical attitude and style (see

Figure 15). Instead of merely proving that asexual people experience intimacy, it is about giving significance to the alternative approaches to intimacy and promoting the life philosophy of asexuals. Because most people are unfamiliar with the symbolic visual elements of the asexual communities, incorporating bold texts and short captions on social media, the animations will be visually more identifiable and will improve the public literacy of the symbols of asexuality.

Going further, the project should invite more input from the asexual communities. Visualizations of real life examples — physical intimacy and beyond — will be affirming and empowering for both people who take up such lifestyles and new community members who are adapting to their identities. The relational dimensions of the asexual identities, including how asexual people practice intimacy and what intimacy means to them, are still under-researched (Scott & Dawson, 2015). In the ideation phase of this project, I drafted a questionnaire about asexual people's attitudes towards different physical contacts and intimacy, which may serve as future inspirations (see Appendix C).

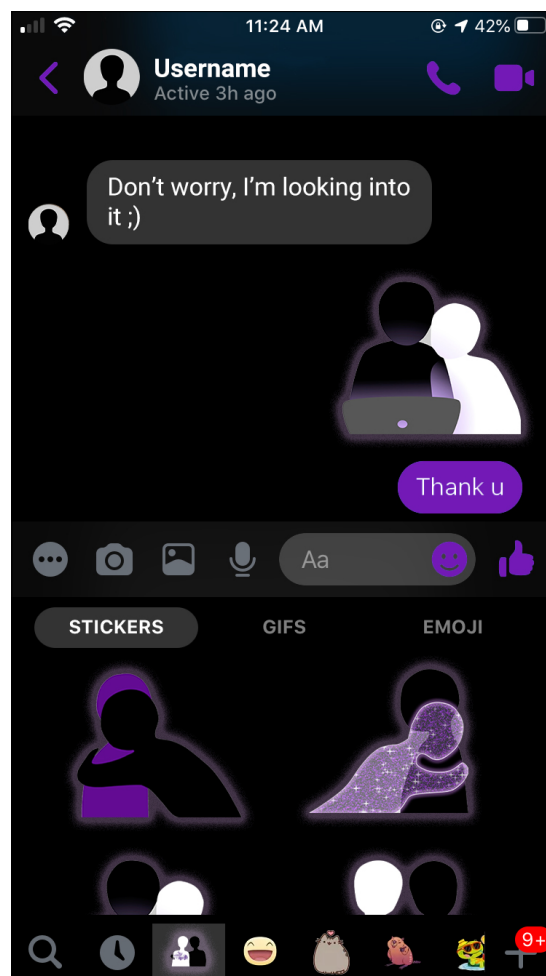


Left: Figure 15. Mockup Instagram post of #intimAces.

#intimAces as a communicative toolkit

How to approach intimacy is a question that most asexual people will encounter after coming to terms with their asexuality. As Jay (2009) describes it: After going through the initial depressed phase about intimacy, “asexual people begin to talk about what intimacy means to them and how they can achieve it on their own terms”. Achieving intimacy “on one’s own terms” can be complicated in practice. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, it suggests “an ongoing process of negotiation concerning the behaviours that develop and maintain practices of intimacy” (Scott & Dawson, 2015, p. 12).

By disseminating a series of moments of nonsexual intimacy, this project may develop into a toolkit that helps people (asexual and/or queer people in particular) to communicate their boundaries and preferences of intimacy, opening up more dialogue about asexual/nonsexual ways of living. The animations can also be used by anyone to express nuanced feelings in online messages (see Figure 16).



Right: Figure 16. Mockup interface of the #intimAces stickers.

#intimAces in media

This may be considered an integration of my two projects — to read and visualize resonances of asexuality depicted in asexual/nonsexual intimacy in media. The ongoing project will be a series of short rotoscoped animations with both symbolic visual elements of asexuality and direct references from TV series, films, and music videos. It is my commentary on the popular culture — both the good representations of asexual/nonsexual intimacy in some works, and the lack in others.

For example, the one I have been working on (see Figure 17) references a scene in *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015-2019). The colour palette remains that of the asexual flag. I rotoscoped the characters and added some effects to emphasize their emotional bonding. The relationship arc between the protagonist Elliot Alderson (in white outlines) and Darlene (in black outlines) takes an interesting turn in the first season (major spoiler alert). The audience was first led to believe that Darlene may have romantic interest in Elliot, but then it was revealed that Elliot is an unreliable narrator who had forgotten that she was his sister. This immediately shifted the audience's reading of Darlene Alderson's intimate acts. It mocks the stereotypical romanticized views in TV shows and reminds us of the essence of all relationships. The choice of this show also considered that throughout the series Elliot never prioritizes pursuing romantic sexual partnerships and is interpreted to be asexual in the headcanon⁷ of some audience. In the future, I expect to find and interpret more media examples of asexual/nonsexual intimacy between friends, in community-building, or within oneself.



Figure 17. One keyframe of #plant. By Renrong Guo, 2020. Animation.

⁷ Fandom slang. The Interpretations of a fictional universe from an individual fan, which is not necessarily supported by the official canon.

RESONANCE REDUCTION : MAKING SYMBOLS FOR THE SUB-IDENTITIES

In *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace* and *#intimAces* (2019), I took resonances of asexuality as subjects of nuanced asexual representations. These projects were primarily built upon queer and feminist scholarship that tend to shift the focus away from definitions of asexuality. In the following experiment, I took a contrasting approach to examine the definitions — the sub-identities on the asexual spectrum — and attempt to make sense of them through symbol-making.

The asexual spectrum contains a range of identities between being asexual and sexual/non-asexual, which all fall under the umbrella term “grey-asexuality” that first appeared in 2006. “Demisexuality”, the most common type of grey-asexuality, was coined at around the same time (Hinderliter, 2016, p. 63-64). Since then, at least 13 more sub-identities have evolved with their own flags (see Figure 18) (Asexual ACES, 2020). While demisexual and grey-asexual people in general are known to be a significant part of the asexual communities (Gurevitch, 2019, p.13), I have rarely seen the rest of the 13 terms being used by people to actually represent themselves, and no flag appeared in the few occasions that I did. The definitions of these labels are very nuanced, and the broad selection of flag colours does not help reflect them. Generally, the flags are not memorable enough to circulate among people who adopt the identities.



Figure 18. Asexual spectrum identities and flags. From *Aspec Identities*, by Asexual ACES, 2020. <http://blog.asexual-aces.com/aspec-identities>. Used by permission of the author.

To help myself understand the definitions and to offer an alternative visual solution, I created four sets of symbols for a few terms whose meanings are relatively distinguishable from one another (see Figure 19) — “akoisexual”, “aceflux”, and “autochorisexual”, together with the four common identities — asexual, sexual / non-asexual, grey-asexual, and demisexual. All symbols were based on the shape extracted from “ace of heart / ace of spade”. The general idea was to use simple shapes, patterns, or outlines as interchangeable components that relate to the definitions. For example, for grey-asexual, the grey colour / dash line represents its state of “in-between”; for autochorisexual (a disconnection between oneself and the object of one’s sexual attraction), a smaller heart shape in the middle of the base asexual symbol represents the disconnected attraction.

In a class workshop, I presented the design to five people who were new to the asexual sub-identities, asking them to select from eight random symbols to match with the four terms and definitions (see Appendix D). The extra options gave people more freedom to assemble a collection that make sense to them. The result (see Figure 20) shows that the connections between some terms and symbols were understood (e.g. aceflux and one version of akoisexual), while for other terms people tended to repurpose different symbols (e.g. in three of five answers, the symbols intended for autochorisexual were matched with demisexual).

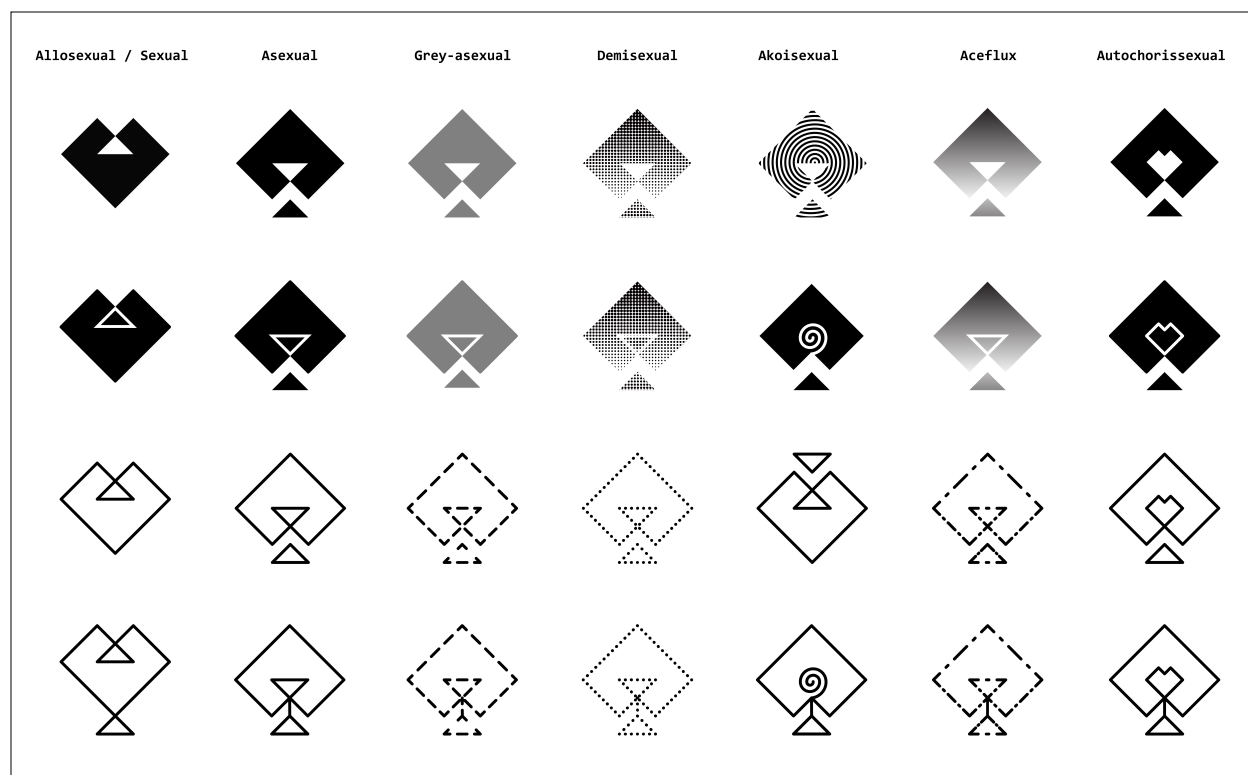






Figure 19. Four sets of symbols. Copyright 2019 by R. Guo.

Examples:

		Asexual	Not experiencing sexual attractions
		Sexual or Allosexual	The opposite of asexual. Created by the asexual community to describe those who are not in the community

Answers: (Three people were given filled icons and two were line icons)

























My design	Name	1	2	3	4	5
	Grey-asexual					
	Aceflux					
	Demisexual					
	Akoisexual					

Figure 20. Workshop result sheet.

To proceed in symbol-making for all sub-identities, the interchangeable components should be made more distinct from one another to increase their readability. The definitions of the sub-identities are centred around attraction, behaviour, and/or relationships, so it might be helpful to categorize all terms and then reflect their correlations and differences in the design. However, when considering the usage scenarios, I

became aware that the functionality of a symbol system could go beyond my initial intention: Would it be used only among people who adopt the sub-identities, or as an educational tool in a broader community? Would a unified symbol set give more credibility and validity to the less common sub-identities, which are not yet acknowledged in major asexual community sources and are dismissed as “snowflake terms on Tumblr” by many asexual and non-asexual people?

The utility of those sub-identities, therefore, should not be left out of the discussion. On the one hand, the terms represent people who need more specific definitions to understand themselves and communicate with others, just like the earlier coined “demisexuality”. On the other hand, creating new sub-identities may have unintended consequences. Historically, the creation of grey-asexuality and other categories might be a consequence of the standardization of the AVEN definition (Hinderliter, 2009; 2016). The strict reading of definitions made those who are close to them feel excluded, thus leading to more terms and definitions. This concern has been reflected in feminist theories: Gupta (2017) points out that creating more categories does not solve the problems of a categorical system but contributes to self-regulation and community policing (p.1007). In a way, the category-making reflects an essentialist view of identities in the asexual communities, posing a contrast to the universalizing tendency in feminist scholarship. This symbol-making experiment, then, is a reduction of the resonances I explored in the two main projects and would like to develop further.

Symbols may help with the creation and education of new vocabulary in the asexual communities, but also reinforce the categorizations and the essentialist way of thinking. Future design shall be aware of such responsibility: to speak of segmentations, but also to point to the similarities that brought all asexual spectrum people to the communities in the first place; to suggest labels, but also to encourage more democratic conversations around the individual experience that is always undefinable.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined two sequential research questions: What can be introduced in future asexual representations to improve the public literacy of asexuality? And how can visual communication tactics be employed to create such representations?

The first question was investigated through an overview of the forms and content of existing visual representations. In the *Visual Study* of online asexual communities, I extracted a few common elements that have yet to be officially recognized as symbols of asexual people. In the *Trend Analysis* of a few popular cases in media, I suggested that with the increasing visibility of the definitive “what asexuality is or isn’t”, it is time to bring out the nuances and possibilities of asexuality in future asexual representations. The second question was explored in the research-creation of two projects and one additional experiment. *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace* and *#intimAces* are about reclaiming the resonances of asexuality from outside the definitions and visually associating them with the diverse real-life asexual experiences; whereas the symbol-making experiment for asexual spectrum identities looks into the specific definitions within definitions.

I recommend the method of actively reclaiming more resonances because of its potential to speak to a broader audience. *Andy Warhol is Aro Ace* is an example of reclaiming resonances at a time in history when contemporary asexual identities did not exist. A proliferation of such examples will both contribute to the archive of asexual history and provides new insights on the work and life of the historical figures, which have influenced many people. *#intimAces* reclaims resonances of asexual intimacy from common interactions across various relationship types. It can be relevant to not only asexual visibility and asexual people, but more recognition of the asexual/nonsexual ways of living for everyone. The universalist characteristics of this method is inherently consistent with the ultimate goal of asexual visibility or visibility for any other minority group — a society where everyone respects differences, embraces diversity, and so flourishes with the freedom of being their true self.

Writing at a difficult time of global segmentations of all kinds and preparing for more to come, I believe that such vision would require even more of our collective efforts to connect. For future development of this proposed method, more participation is needed for asexual people to tell their stories and to curate the resonances that are not yet reclaimed from the society’s comfort zone of compulsory sexuality. The feedback from both the asexual communities and the public will be needed for evaluation before a larger-scale dissemination. For asexual visibility in general, I look forward to more representations and research on asexual communities from different cultural backgrounds. How does their experience resonate with the

asexual communities we are familiar with? What are the visual elements they use to represent themselves? Do they need more asexual visibility in their regions, and what can be done to achieve that? It is my hope that this thesis may serve as an inspiration for designers and researchers to further explore into the nuances of asexuality, communities, and representations.

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APPENDICES

A. Glossary of terms

Asexuality

A type of sexual orientation or the absence of sexual orientation. An asexual person experiences little to no sexual attraction but may experience other types of attractions to others.

Ace

An abbreviation for “asexual” or “asexual people” that is commonly used within the community.

The Asexual Spectrum

A spectrum that consists of asexuality and many sub-identities between asexual and sexual⁸, in which the two most significant terms are **Grey-Asexuality** (the umbrella term for all the in-between identities) and **Demisexuality** (an identity within Grey-Asexuality, for people who does not experience sexual attraction unless a close emotional bond is formed). Other sub-identities include **Akoisexuality** (people who might experience sexual attraction but not want their feelings to be reciprocated), **Aceflux** (people whose sexual attraction fluctuates between asexual and sexual), and **Autochorissexuality** (or Aegosexuality, for people who experience a disconnection between themselves and the object of their sexual attraction).

Aromantic

Referring to people who does not experience romantic attractions, often seen in its short form, “**aro**”. Although one may identify as aromantic without being asexual, the idea of separating romantic and sexual attractions was formed in the asexual discourse: some asexuals can be romantically attracted to people of certain genders, while others seek meaningful relationships that are non-romantic. There are other attraction types such as “aesthetic”, “platonic”, and “sensual”, theorized under the “Split Attraction Model”. However, many asexuals have claimed that this model does not apply to their experience and rejected the splitting of attraction types.

The Asexual Communities

The asexual communities consist of all people from the asexual spectrum. Although the singular form of “community” is more common in asexuality studies, this thesis uses the plural form to acknowledge the differences and nuances within online communities (of different platforms) and offline communities (of different geographic locations and different cultural backgrounds).

⁸ Or “allosexual”, a term proposed by the asexual communities in refer to the opposite of asexual. Considering that it is slightly controversial and some find it pejorative, this thesis uses “sexual” or “non-asexual” instead.

B. Data from the community visual study

Keyword	Type	Element 1	Element 2	Element 3	Direct Reference
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Florance in Sex Education (TV)
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Florance in Sex Education (TV)
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Florance in Sex Education (TV)
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Florance in Sex Education (TV)
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Florance in Sex Education (TV)
asexuality	Illustration	Asexual flag	Fictional asexual character in ace theme	Heart shape	Donatello in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Comics)
asexuality	Photo	Ace of cards	-	-	-
asexuality	Picture	Asexual flag	Other flags	-	-
asexuality	Costume	Asexual flag	Knight	-	-
asexuality	TV screenshot	Asexual people	-	-	Pauley Perrette (asexual celebrity)
asexuality	Picture	Asexual flag	Asexual people	-	Yasmin Benoit (asexual activist)
asexuality	Picture	Asexual flag	Other flags	Stones	-
asexuality	Game screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Parvati Holcomb in The Outer Worlds (Video Game)
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Alastor in Hazbin Hotel (TV)

asexuality	Picture	Asexual people	-	-	Yasmin Benoit (asexual activist)
asexuality	Photo	Asexual flag	Other flags	-	-
asexuality	Poster	Asexual flag	-	-	-
asexuality	Costume	Asexual flag	Heart shape	-	"ace cadet" superhero character
asexuality	Artifact	Asexual flag	Fictional asexual character in ace theme	-	Untitled Goose Game (Video Game)
asexuality	Picture	Asexual flag	-	-	-
asexuality	Picture	Asexual people	-	-	@thisiswhatasexuallookslike on Instagram
asexuality	Meme	Asexual flag	Sea sponge	-	-
asexuality	Illustration	Asexual flag	Fictional asexual character in ace theme	Heart Shape	Elsa in Frozen 2 (Movie)
asexuality	Picture	Asexual flag	Other flags	Rainbow colours	-
asexuality	Meme	Asexual flag	-	-	-
asexuality	TV screenshot	Fictional asexual character	-	-	Todd Chavez in Bojack Horseman (TV)
asexuality	Photo	Asexual people	-	-	Yasmin Benoit (asexual activist)
asexuality	Animation	Asexual flag	-	-	Tadanon (Dancer)
asexuality	Game screenshot	Fictional asexual character			Parvati Holcomb in The Outer Worlds (Video Game)
asexuality	Illustration	Asexual flag	-	-	-

Keyword	Type	Element 1	Element 2	Element 3	Element 4	Direct Reference	Character
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Game	-	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	Plant	Heart shape	-	female, poc
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	Heart shape	-	-	female, poc
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Other flags	Plant	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Plant	-	-	-	-	
asexual art	Comic	Asexual flag	Plant	-	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Rainbow colours	Fictional character in ace theme	Other flags	Wooloo (pokemon)	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	Space	Other flags	-	female, poc
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Dragon	-	-	-	
asexual art	Comic	People	-	-	-	-	female
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Game	Space	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Opossum	Rainbow colours	-	-	
asexual art	Comic	Asexual flag	Fictional asexual character	Heart shape	Dragon	Todd Chavez in Bojack	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	-	-	-	N/A
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Skull	-	-	-	

asexual art	Collage	Asexual flag	Space	Cloud	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	Plant	-	-	female, poc
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	People	Other flags	Heart shape	-	male, poc
asexual art	Comic	Asexual flag	People	-	-	-	
asexual art	Comic	Asexual flag	Other flags	People	-	-	female
asexual art	Collage	Asexual flag	-	-	-	-	
asexual art	Comic	People	-	-	-	-	N/A
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Space	-	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Dragon	-	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Rainbow colours	-	-	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Warrior	Ace of cards	People	-	female, poc
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Game	Plant	Other flags	-	
asexual art	Illustration	Fictional asexual character	intimacy	-			Good Omens (TV)
asexual art	Illustration	Fictional asexual character	-	-	-		Todd Chavez in Bojack
asexual art	Illustration	Asexual flag	Dragon	-	-	-	

Keyword	Type	Element 1	Element 2	Element 3	Element 4	Element 5	Element 6
asexual aesthetic	Illustration	Asexual flag	Skull	Feather	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	User tag	Asexual flag	-	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Plant	Sea	Room interior	Book	-
asexual aesthetic	Illustration	Asexual flag	Icecream	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Artefact	Asexual flag	Game	Stone	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Illustration	Asexual flag	Heart shape	Plant	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Artefact	Asexual flag	Game	Stone	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	Ace ring	Ace of cards	Cake	Batman
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	-	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Smoke	Space	Glitter	Fictional character in ace theme	Room Interior
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Witch	Stone	Moon	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Space	-	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	Heart shape	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Game	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Other flags	Plant	Heart shape	-	-

asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Cake	Icecream	Sweets	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Icecream	Sweets	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Plant	Sea	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Cake	Sweets	Space	Book	Key
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Ace of cards	Other flags	Ring	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	Glitter	Plant	Other flags	
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Star Wars	Space	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Sea	Fish	Ace ring	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Other flags	Plant	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Icecream	-	-	-	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Glitter	Star	Plant	Skull	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Other flags	Sign	Dog	Ring	-
asexual aesthetic	Moodboard	Asexual flag	Space	Ace of cards	Hand	Sign	-

C. Questionnaire on asexual intimacy

3/14/2020

Asexuality, physical contact, and intimacy

Asexuality, physical contact, and intimacy

Hello! I am Harley from Emily Carr University of Art + Design. I am doing my masters thesis on communication design and asexuality.

This questionnaire is about asexual people's perspectives on physical contacts and intimacy. The results will only be used as inspirations for an ongoing motion graphic project. Some of the previous work can be found here (for the best result, please don't check it out before finishing the questions): <https://vimeo.com/user96075665> (Suggestions and comments are welcome!)

The questionnaire has 12 questions, in which 3 questions requires text input.

All participants are anonymous. You are free to decide to quit the questionnaire now or at any stage before submitting your answers. Thank you in advance for your time and contribution!

***Required**

Basic Information

1. Which age group are you in?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Under 18
☐ 18 - 25
☐ 26 - 35
☐ 36 - 50
☐ Above 50

2. What is your gender?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Other

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1iVU0WmiH--F1iOxKNsAUOUpbkelgGE9EEV-dHIiSMa8/edit>

1/6

3. What sexual orientation(s) do you identify with? (check all that apply) *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Akoisexual or akoineseexual or lithsexual
- ☐ Demisexual
- ☐ Gray-asexual
- ☐ Questioning or not sure
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Pansexual

Other: ☐ _____

4. Which (if any) of the following romantic orientation do you identify with? *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Romantic / Alloromantic
- ☐ Aromantic
- ☐ Demiromantic
- ☐ Gray-romantic / gray-aromantic
- ☐ Lithromantic
- ☐ Quoiromantic / WTFromantic
- ☐ Questioning or not sure
- ☐ I am not familiar with some or all of the labels above
- ☐ I prefer not to use the romantic orientation terminology to describe myself

Other: ☐ _____

5. Which degree may best represent your attitude towards sex? (3 = indifferent)

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Repulsed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Positive

Physical
contacts
and
intimacy

In this section, please feel free to copy and paste links to pictures you find online, in order to assist describing the answers.

*If you are on a computer, you can start doing this by opening a new tab on your browser. Go to websites like Google Images (<https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en>), find an image or a few images that fit, right click on the image, choose "copy image address", and go back to paste the link in any of the text boxes.

6. Which degree may best represent your attitude towards physical contacts with others? (4 = indifferent) *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Touch repulsed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Touch starved

7. What are the physical contacts you DON'T like when interacting with people you know and are on good terms with, if no boundaries are crossed? (Images of each option removed for copyright reason) *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Handshake
- ☐ Pat on your shoulder or back
- ☐ Hold hands
- ☐ Hug
- ☐ Rest one's head on another's shoulder
- ☐ side hug
- ☐ Cuddle
- ☐ Long eye contact or staring
- ☐ What I checked above might be acceptable when it is with some specific people
- ☐ None of the above

Other: ☐ _____

8. Who is the person that is the closest to you? (check all that apply if there are more than one)

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Parent
- ☐ Spouse or life partner
- ☐ Romantic partner
- ☐ Queer Platonic Partner
- ☐ Sibling
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Child
- ☐ Distant family member
- ☐ Roommate

Other: ☐ _____

9. Which degree may best represent your attitude towards having physical intimacy (4 = indifferent) *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I don't want any.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	It is important to me.

10. What are the kinds of physical contact (if any) you would usually use to show intimacy or closeness to others? *

11. Describe the most emotionally and physically intimate moment you have experienced and felt comfortable with. *

12. Describe your ideal kind of intimacy. *




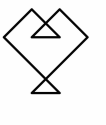
D. Symbol workshop forms

Step 1: Match terms with icons (5 min)




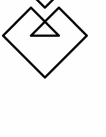




Please read the definitions of the sub-identities / micro-labels of asexuality and link each definition to one icon that you find the most suitable.

- Feel free to discuss with people in your group about the definitions while you are doing this, but please come up with your own individual answers.
- Remember that there is no wrong answer; some of the terminologies are only acknowledged and used by some members of the asexual & aromantic communities.

Examples:

		Asexual	Not experiencing sexual attractions
		Allosexual	The opposite of asexual. Created by the asexual community to describe those who are not in the community

Your answers:



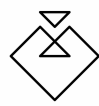

		Grey-asexual	May experience sexual attraction but very infrequently, "in between" asexual and allosexual.
		Aceflux	Someone whose sexual orientation fluctuates but always stays on the asexual spectrum
		Demisexual	Does not experience sexual attraction until they have formed a deep emotional connect with someone
		Akoisexual or Lithosexual	May experience sexual attraction but does not want it reciprocated

Step 1: Match terms with icons (5 min)









Please read the definitions of the sub-identities / micro-labels of asexuality and link each definition to one icon that you find the most suitable.

- Feel free to discuss with people in your group about the definitions while you are doing this, but please come up with your own individual answers.
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Examples:

		Asexual	Not experiencing sexual attractions
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Your answers:

		Grey-asexual	May experience sexual attraction but very infrequently, "in between" asexual and allosexual.
		Aceflux	Someone whose sexual orientation fluctuates but always stays on the asexual spectrum
		Demisexual	Does not experience sexual attraction until they have formed a deep emotional connect with someone
		Akoisexual or Lithosexual	May experience sexual attraction but does not want it reciprocated

E. Data from the Collective Identity Mural at the 2019 Ace & Aro Conference

Keyword	Question	Answer1	Answer2	Answer3
Spectrums	What's important to you about being someplace on the ace/aro spectrum?	Knowing who I am and understanding it, fitting somewhere.	I might not know exactly where I fall, but my experience is still real and valid.	Learning that "graysexual" was a term was an "aha" moment for me and helped clarify my identity.
Here and Now	What you like about being aromantic and/or asexual?	A unique perspective on relationships and intimacy	Me :)	Community/having aspec family who understands
	Shout-out board: Write someone or something that's been really helpful	<u>"If you can see the invisible elephant please describe it"</u> blog post	<u>Acejokes</u> Tumblr/ @justaroacethings (social networking website accounts)	My family + friends
	How did you find out about the terms aromantic and/or asexual?	Tumblr (4) / Aven (2)	The (A)sexual documentary	Aro ace friend / friends / roommate / ...
	What's the hardest part about being aromantic and/or asexual?	Explaining to allos	Being forgotten by my partnered friends / feeling left out /	Family wanting you to get an s.o.
	What does love mean to you?	Safe, seen, supported	Love means people who are happy to see me	Feeling comfortable and free
	What does family mean for you?	People who I choose to share my life with	Family is the people who will be there for you no matter who you are, and loving you.	Love + acceptance. Community

Keyword	Question	Answer4	Answer5	Answer6
Spectrums	What's important to you about being someplace on the ace/aro spectrum?	bodily autonomy	Being true to myself	That I experience love and affection in my own unique way and that has its place in the world.
Here and Now	What you like about being aromantic and/or asexual?	Not having to worry about sexual attraction (seriously I say "thank god I'm ace" a lot)	No relationship drama	Not worrying as much about peoples opinions
	Shout-out board: Write someone or something that's been really helpful	Connie Glynn/ Yasmin Bennoit/ Alice Oseman (influencers, artists)	AVEN	NYC Aces (IRL community)
	How did you find out about the terms aromantic and/or asexual?	Fan fictions	<u>Sexplanations</u>	Furcadia
	What's the hardest part about being aromantic and/or asexual?	Not being believed/ taken seriously / Finding out people who I thought were friends are aphobic / lack of understanding	Dating / <- BIG SAME / Finding a life partner /	Distinguishing what I actually want and feel from what I think I'm "supposed" to want or feel / Feeling valid in my queer identity / amatonormativity attacking me from all directions / doubting myself
	What does love mean to you?	Feeling seen, safe, understood + wanted	Being truly accepted + seen	
	What does family mean for you?	People who love me and treat me with respect		

Keyword	Question	Answer1	Answer2	Answer3
What We Want	What we want	Friends not questioning my ace-ness (even if they don't understand)	REPRESENTATION REPRESENTATION REPRESENTATION!!!	A world where everybody gets to be who they are (is accepted)
	I still have questions about...	Being in relationships	"Am I still ace-spec if I really wanna kiss [insert fictional character here]?"	The difference between romantic & platonic / HARD SAME / Yup
	One thing that worries/scares me...	Not being understood in my asexuality	Ending up "alone" / <- Same	Not being heard or understood
	Because of today, I will...	Be more open about my sexuality	Be filled with ... determination	Come out
	What's your dream life?	A roof over my head, food in the fridge, and people to share it with (and books!)	A bunch of ace roommates + we all hang out together + watch Doctor Who	Queer Ace commune
	In the future, I hope...	for asexuality education in all schools	things work out	Aspects are more well known + accepted in queer spaces
	If I had the courage, I would...	Try online dating to find a QPP	Talk to the cute girl here	Be more open to finding partner(s)
And, but, or	I'm ace and I'm...	a person	FREED	Warm + loving! / funny / a powerful lesbian lady
	I'm ace but I'm not...	a plant or a robot	that innocent	immature or childish
	I'm aro and I'm...	able to love all my friends	happy about my identity	me
	I'm aro but I'm not...	alone/lonely	sad	frigid or unloving

Keyword	Question	Answer4	Answer5	Answer6
What We Want	What we want	Education esp. intersectional education = requirement/standard. I'm physically disabled. I am ace. I am grey aro. These are not linked.	Safe + loving INTIMACY	
	I still have questions about...	Romantic, platonic, aesthetic attraction		
	One thing that worries/scares me...	Suicide rates in ace/ aro community	Never being "Queer enough"	
	Because of today, I will...	Share info with my local community	To be content with myself and my life, to love and allow others to love me	Be proud of myself!
	What's your dream life?	A bunch of cats in a tiny house + being able to travel a lot	Writing aspec books + educating people. Being happy	don't have to educate + a girlfriend
	In the future, I hope...	To find a person who loves and accepts me	to break out of the echo chamber	
	If I had the courage, I would...	Talk to the cute guy here	actually *try* dating	
And, but, or	I'm ace and I'm...	A prude! Super religious! Socially awkward!	relationship-minded	still attracted to some people (like once every 5 years)
	I'm ace but I'm not...	a prude	land to be conquered	to be ignored
	I'm aro and I'm...			
	I'm aro but I'm not...			