Asexuality and Boundaries in Online Discourse

Dominique A. Canning

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Asexuality and Boundaries in Online Discourse

Abstract
In this research, I will analyze the ongoing online discussion about whether or not asexuality "can" or "should" be considered "queer enough" to be included in queer spaces. By combining research based in both discourse analysis and queer theory, this paper offers a unique view not only of asexuality’s status in contemporary culture, but also of the way language is used to make statements about who belongs and who doesn’t, particularly in online spaces. This work will further explore how ideologies affect the formation of, and discourse between, different groups (van Dijk 2006b: 733-734).

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Department
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First Advisor
Eric Acton

Second Advisor
Beverley Goodman

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ASEXUALITY AND BOUNDARIES IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

By

Dominique A. Canning

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0. ABSTRACT
In this research, I will analyze the ongoing online discussion about whether or not asexuality "can" or "should" be considered "queer enough" to be included in queer spaces. By combining research based in both discourse analysis and queer theory, this paper offers a unique view not only of asexuality's status in contemporary culture, but also of the way language is used to make statements about who belongs and who doesn't, particularly in online spaces. This work will further explore how ideologies affect the formation of, and discourse between, different groups (van Dijk 2006b: 733-734).

1. INTRODUCTION
Asexuality, as a term used to describe a person who does not experience sexual attraction, has gained attention since the creation of the Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN), a website dedicated to educating about and advocating for asexuality, in 2001 (Bogaert 2012: 38). Since its inception, AVEN has provided a place for asexual people to learn, discuss, and interact with people who share similar identities and experiences. However, the creation of this community has led to a number of complicated questions, not the least of which is: are asexual people queer?

This is not an easy question to answer. In the book *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner writes that *queer* was a term "initially generated in the context of terror…" (Warner 1993: xxvi), and many people feel this context does not include asexual people. However, in the same book, Warner also writes that *queer* "gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal…" (Warner 1993: xxvi). Based on this idea of *queer*, many believe asexuality is queer.

This paper does not seek to determine who in this argument is right or who is wrong, if anyone, but rather to observe and analyze the discussion as it occurs in
different online settings. Due in part to the popularity of AVEN, the asexual community is primarily focused online. AVEN, while being the go-to source for information on asexuality, is also home to forums in a variety of languages. This paper will focus on the AVEN English forums and compare them to forums on Reddit.

Reddit is a website made up of different “Subreddits,” which are “individual communities… [with their] own pages, subject matter, users, and moderators” (“What is Reddit?”). For this paper, I focused on three threads from r/Asexuality, the asexuality subreddit, as well as three non-asexual subreddits to get a variety of participants in the discussion. The chosen threads were picked because they focused on the question of whether asexuality is a queer identity, as well as—in some cases—whether or not asexual people should be considered part of the wider lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community.

In this work, I will examine how the conversations regarding asexuality and queerness are taking place online. Using the methods of discourse analysis, I have set out to examine the features and tactics used by participants in this discussion, as well as to search for linguistic patterns within the different spaces, focusing primarily on the terms used to refer to asexual and queer people when users discussed an opposing group or ideology. The purpose of this research is to increase understanding of the intricate dynamics that come into play while discussing identity, with the hope that this knowledge can facilitate future conversations concerning marginalized communities. As I will show, these dynamics can manifest in various ways, whether in the kinds of evidence people bring forward to support their claims in the discussion, how one group names another, or even which pronouns are used when referring to groups.
This paper will begin with a literature review that gives an explanation of identity terms, as well as historical and academic background on the term *queer*. I will then explore previous research done on the roles and dynamics of online queer spaces, while also discussing linguistic research pertaining to the Internet and group dynamics. After providing an explanation of my methodology, I will present and discuss my findings. I conclude with some suggestions for future research.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The purpose of this section is to provide background on the issue at hand: should asexuality be considered a queer identity and should asexual people be given access to queer spaces? I will present research that has been done on asexuality and queerness; language as it occurs online; and discourse analysis, particularly analysis that focuses on the structure and presentation of groups in polarized discussions. This section will give widely accepted definitions of the different identity terms that will be essential to understanding the following paper. It will also briefly outline the history of the asexual community, as well as historical and current uses and meanings of *queer*. While the provided definitions are essential to the understanding of this paper, it must be stressed that these definitions are specific to this paper. In fact, much of the issue at hand is due to disputes in definitions. Identities are intensely personal, and in many cases, it is best to let the person using a term define the term for themselves. After giving definitions, I will provide possible explanations of and parallels to the discussion currently occurring online. Further information and discussion of these topics can be found in Canning, 2015.

2.1 Asexuality

As discussed in the introduction, asexuality is a term used to describe a person who does not experience sexual attraction. People who do experience sexual attraction
are often referred to as sexual or allosexual. Following AVEN, I will use the term sexual. While it’s tempting to claim that asexuality is a new creation, that would be incorrect. Asexuality is a newly recognized orientation, as the “use of the word ‘asexual’ [or ace] to describe an individual may also be a relatively modern, Western phenomenon” (Bogaert 2012: 38), but that doesn’t mean it’s an entirely new concept.

In psychology, Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD) was first listed in the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980, though its name changed to Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder in 1987 (“Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder”). The current issue of the DSM, DSM-V, states, “If a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by one’s self-identification as ‘asexual,’ then a diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder [or male hypoactive sexual desire disorder] is not made” (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 434, 443). There are also some historical figures who, based on their sexual behavior, are suspected to have been asexual, like Emily Brontë and Sir Isaac Newton (Bogaert 2012: 34). (Of course, there’s no way of knowing if these historical figures would’ve identified as asexual, especially since asexuality is not based on behavior, but on attraction.)

Attraction is an important piece within this discussion because it is at the intersection sexual and romantic orientation where many of the issues lie. Anthony Bogaert (2012), in his book Understanding Asexuality, defines asexuality as, “A complete lack of sexual attraction and/or sexual interest…and not just a middle-age, on-again, off-again malaise about sex…” (5). Notice this definition does not include behavior, nor does it include biological ability. While attraction, behavior, and biological ability are intrinsically linked, asexuality is defined on the basis of “not being sexually attracted to others” (Decker 2014: 3). The focus on attraction is important in this conversation, particularly because many people within the asexual
community experience romantic attraction as "an independent experience from sexual attraction..." (Decker 2014: 19), meaning that they differentiate between romantic orientation and sexual orientation.

Sexual attraction, according to Bogaert, is taken to refer to "the 'sexual' or lust lure for others. ... [or] what might be termed one's 'sexual orientation'" (11). Julie Sondra Decker further describes sexual orientation as "a person's pattern of attraction" (2014: 13); therefore, under this definition, asexuality is a sexual orientation, as it refers to a pattern of not being sexually attracted to anyone. Romantic attraction refers to "'the feelings of infatuation and emotional attachment' associated with pair bonding" (Lisa Diamond, qtd. in Bogaert 2012: 11), or "...the 'love' attraction we have for others..." (11). Terms used to describe romantic parallel terms used to describe sexual orientations. There are many terms a person can use to describe which gender(s) they find themselves romantically attracted to, such as aromantic, biromantic, or heteroromantic (20). Some people identify as aromantic asexual, meaning they do not experience romantic or sexual attraction to others (Decker 2014: 22). These terms, however, do not always align neatly. For example, a person can identify as heteroromantic asexual, meaning they are "romantically attracted to [different-sex] or [different-gender] people" (Decker 2014: 20), but are not sexually attracted to anyone. It is the often the inclusion of heteroromantic-identified people within queer spaces that complicates the discussion at hand, for reasons that will be further explored in the discussion of queer.

2.2 Queer

*Queer* is a term mired in a politically and physically violent history. In June of 1969, a series of riots occurred at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. This event, now known as the Stonewall Riots, is often cited as motivating "...the transformation
of the gay political movement” (Carter 2004: 1). There are many eyewitnesses who acknowledge that the people initially resisting the police were people who would be considered queer today, particularly transgender and gender nonconforming people (Carter 2004: 261).

Originally considered a slur against people who were perceived to have a non-normative gender or sexual identity, *queer* began to be reclaimed during the AIDS epidemic by the group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), who changed their name to Queer Nation in the early 1990s (Levy & Johnson 2011: 130). Politically, *queer* has “… [focused] on eliminating oppression by radically disrupting and transforming society’s norms and hierarchical structures…” (Levy & Johnson 2011: 130). Michael Warner expands on this, writing, “…‘Queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual…” (Warner 1993: xxvi). Between Levy & Johnson and Warner, it would be safe to say that *queer* works to dismantle heteronormativity, or the belief that heterosexuality, and the structures and expectations that come with it, is the norm, and everything else is abnormal.

*Queer* also challenges heteronormativity present within LGBTQ spaces and movements. Levy & Johnson write, “In contrast to gay and lesbian movements, which relied on identity to obtain political gain, *queer* highlights the ‘limitations of identity categories’…” (Jagose, qtd. in Levy & Johnson 2011: 131). Through its own lack of definition, *queer* “…embraces the multi-dimensionality of human existence…” (Epstein, qtd. in Levy & Johnson 2011: 131). If these are accepted definitions of *queer*, what is the source of the tension between asexuality and queerness?

The issue lies in political and personal identity. *Queer* carries many, often contradicting, definitions (Levy & Johnson 2011: 131). Currently, *queer* is used by people who have “…non-mainstream sexual or gender identities” (Barton 2009: 242),
and who wish to show their belonging within a group “that’s as wide and inclusive as ‘gay’ once was” (Robinson 2009: 157). However, many contest asexuality’s inclusion within this group on the basis of misunderstandings of definitions, as well as what experiences asexual people may have. The definition of asexuality, which focuses on a lack of sexual attraction, is often believed to focus on the lack of sexual orientation altogether. This is problematic, in that queer as a term and as a movement, is meant to focus on marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities. It is the struggle for a clear definition of what constitutes a marginalized identity that is at the heart of this discussion.

2.3 Boundaries

Kristin S. Scherrer, in her article “Coming to an Asexual Identity,” cites Paula Rust who writes, “Sexual identity is a ‘description of the self in relation to other individuals, groups, and institutions,’” (Rust 1996, qtd. In Scherrer 2008: 637). For the queer young people who are unable to meet others face-to-face, the Internet is a valuable resource that allows them to explore their identity in “safety and privacy without the stigma associated with the experience of queerness” (Fraser 2010: 31). AVEN fills this need for many asexual people; however, where LGBTQ youth have the opportunity to see their experiences represented in non-virtual spaces, the same is not necessarily true for asexual people. These social boundaries lead to asexual people feeling “abnormal,” or broken as they try to understand their identity (Bogaert 2012).

Boundaries based on social identity don’t only exist in the conversation surrounding asexuality. They’re also seen in racially diverse spaces, as discussed by Richard Buttny (1999) in his article “Discursive Constructions of Racial Boundaries and Self-Segregation on Campus,” in which he examined the boundaries to interracial discourse on a college campus. Another example of boundaries between two social
groups and the resulting consequences can be seen in “Another Kind of ‘Chilly
Climate,” in which Julie E. Hartman (2005) explores the “us vs. them identity
politics” (63) that arose as a result of the exclusion bisexual women felt within the
lesbian community. Hartman pulls from research done by Paula Rust in 1995 that
found “79% [of surveyed lesbians] believe bisexuals experience less prejudice than
lesbians” (Rust, qtd. In Hartman 2005: 64). This example in particular shows the
tension that exists between ideas of queerness and heteronormative society. In
Hartman’s example, this manifests as the question of whether or not bisexual women
are “queer enough” to be in lesbian spaces, calling the bisexual experience into
question.

While many of the women in “Chilly Climate” didn’t report experiences of
overt exclusion, one bisexual woman said that it seemed “people don’t really think
about [bisexuality]” (Hartman 2005: 69), suggesting that comments and assumptions
made may unintentionally exclude certain identities that are present within a space.

A similar phenomenon occurs with asexuality. However, as with any identity,
there are some who make their opinions on asexuality more overt. And while Cara
MacInnis & Gordon Hodson (2011) found that anti-asexual bias was “repeatedly
stronger than bias toward other sexual minorities…” with “[asexuals being] viewed as
less human... [and] lacking in terms of human nature” (739), many believe that it
doesn’t make sense for asexual people to “assert their identity... within a public
sphere,” as they are not “engaging in potentially prohibited behavior...and do not
need public acceptance” (Bogaert 2012: 84). This statement, that asexual people don’t
need to assert their identity because they don’t “need public acceptance,” shows how
experiencing oppression is, for some, a prerequisite for queerness. In other words, in
order to truly be “queer enough,” one has to experience discrimination, and possibly
violence. It is based on this belief that many people do not consider asexual people queer. This has led to many asexual people feeling unwelcome in the queer community.

In 2014, “The AVEN Community Census” surveyed asexual communities online, and found that, of the asexual respondents, 14% felt they were not welcome in the Queer/LGBTQ+ community for any reason (Ginoza, et al. 2014: 13). Adding this to the 18% of asexual respondents that felt welcome in LGBTQ+ spaces only because of another identity, that means that 32% of the nearly 11,000 asexual respondents felt that their asexual identity wasn’t considered enough to make them a part of the LGBTQ community (Ginoza, et al. 2014). Furthermore, as Scherrer writes, “The lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality is a barrier to its inclusion in other sexuality-based political action groups” (2008: 636), possibly leading to exclusion from LGBTQ spaces simply because people “don’t really think about it” (Hartman 2005: 69).

2.4 Discourse Analysis

Discourse, as explained by Barbara Johnstone, is made up of “…actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language…” (Johnstone 2008: 2). Johnstone describes discourse analysis as something other than the study of “language as an abstract system,” but rather as something that “…happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language,…based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before to…exchange information…” (Johnstone 2008: 3). Discourse analysis can “shed light on how meaning can be created…via the details of how a conversationalist takes up and responds to what has just been said,” while also showing how “speakers indicate their semantic intentions and how hearers interpret what they hear…” (Johnstone 2008). Understanding
discourse allows us to understand subjects like “dominance and oppression...personal identity and social identification” (Johnstone 2008: 7). This research will use discourse analysis to show how participants online discuss themselves, other groups, and opposing ideologies.

Group Ideology and its Effect on Discourse

T.A. van Dijk, in his article “Politics, Ideology, and Discourse” (2006), explores the effects of ideology on arguments within the realm of politics, looking closely at the way group identity “control[s] the individual discourses and other social practices of group members” (van Dijk 2006: 730). One way that language is used to exercise control is through the use of manipulation to show one’s own group in a favorable light, while simultaneously associating unpleasant or unfavorable traits with the opposing group (van Dijk 2006: 734). This is most often seen in arguments pertaining to controversial or polarizing subjects which, “[reflect] competing or conflicting group membership and categorization in ingroups and outgroups...”. leading to discourse becoming polarized as well (van Dijk 2006: 734). When it comes to the discussion of asexuality and queerness, this is important to highlight, as such polarization can be seen in many ways. One way could be the use of pronouns, like us and them; however, it can also be seen in the way different identities are grouped. For example, in an attempt to show that asexuality doesn’t belong within the queer community, one might group asexual people with people who are cisgender (i.e. whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth) and heterosexual. This tactic positions asexuality with a group that’s usually discussed in opposition to queerness (Warner 1993). On the other hand, if one wishes to show that they do belong within the community, they may compare experiences had by asexual people to those experienced by bisexual people, who are typically associated with the
But why would a marginalized community want to exclude another marginalized community? In *The Politics of Exclusion*, Stephen Harold Riggins attempts to answer this question by explaining the use of the “external Other” within discourse analysis. *Other* is taken to refer, in this case, to “all people… [perceived] as mildly or radically different…” (Riggins 1997: 4). *Other* is considered a more suitable term for those outside the norm, as it doesn’t carry the negative connotations associated with *deviant*. While many understand *othering* as majority groups vs. minority groups, Riggins does discuss those who are *othered* within an already marginalized group, or “others of a minority” (Riggins 1997: 6). If one considers asexual people to be “others of a minority,” Riggins’ following ideas can be applied to the discussion of whether or not asexuality is a queer identity. Riggins says, “The discourses of identity articulated by majority populations are likely to be univocal and monologist…. By comparison, the discourses of identity articulated by members of subordinate minorities tend to be contradictory, complex, and ironic” (Riggins 1997: 9), meaning that within minority discourse, it can be unclear who is part of the group, and who is “other” (Riggins 1997: 6). While many in the dominant “normative” society assume *queer* to include any person with non-normative gender, sexual, and romantic identities, those within queer communities are more inclined to separate themselves, influencing the way they discuss and determine identity. Asexuality is often seen in opposition to the, until recently, unnamed *sexual majority*, which is considered “apolitical” compared to the “abnormality” of asexuality (Riggins 1997). The differences perceived between majorities and minorities, as well as between different minorities, can have consequences for any discourse that may later take
Richard Buttny, in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, discusses the work he did to answer the following question: “What are students’ discursive constructions of separateness, boundaries, and difference?” (Buttny 1999: 251). Discussing possible boundaries to discourse between two opposing racial groups, Buttny writes, “…Minority group members with a strong sense of group solidarity and dependence will perceive communication boundaries [between themselves and others] as stronger” (Buttny 1999: 248). Buttny’s research, while focused on self-segregation of racial groups on a college campus, is relevant to the inclusion of asexuality as a queer identity, as it addresses the use of separation as a way to preserve identity. In his research, Buttny found that many of the students in both the majority and minority groups were able to justify the existing boundaries, considering the separation as a way to protect social identity (Buttny 1999: 263). In this way, the preservation of one’s identity may encourage self-segregation between the asexual and queer communities, which may be the reason why nearly 10% of asexual respondents to the 2014 AVEN Community Census stated that they do not wish to be part of the “Queer/LGBTQ+” community at all (Ginoza, et al. 2014: 13).

### 2.5 Language and Discourse on the Internet

As noted above, online spaces play a role in both asexual and LGBTQ socialization and identity development (Scherrer 2008, Fraser 2010). Vikki Fraser (2010), in “Queer Closets and Rainbow Hyperlinks” discusses the use of the Internet by LGBTQ youth to learn more about the “rules” of queerness in a safe space. One point made by Fraser is that, because the coming out age for LGBTQ people is dropping, it is no longer possible for many people, who are often under the age of 18, to use spaces traditionally available to LGBTQ people, such as bars and clubs, to
learn how to “do queerness” (Fraser 2010: 31). Scherrer (2008) brings up a similar point:

“...the privacy provided by the internet is beneficial to the formation of asexual identities. Individuals can practice their narratives of asexuality in a safe space, as well as find community and support.... For many asexual individuals, the internet has facilitated the discovery, not only of a language by which to describe themselves and a community that offers support and acceptance, but also a way of thinking about their asexuality as an essential characteristic of themselves.” (Scherrer 2008: 624, 631)

Through Scherrer and Fraser, we are given a reason why doing social identity research in online spaces may be beneficial; however, neither of them sets out to address the nature of language use in these spaces.

The interest in online language isn’t new. From people worried that the Internet is “ruining language,” to those fascinated by the different slang terms and changing grammar online, Internet language is often the topic of conversation. The Internet is a place where language behaves differently than in real life spaces because the majority of linguistic interaction occurs in print. Because there is so much variety in how print may function online, David Crystal suggests that online language be treated as something between speech and written text, and proposes features that could be used as tools to analyze internet language. Crystal (2001) suggests focusing on five features of written language: graphic, “the general presentation and organization of written language” (7); grammatical, or things like “sentence structure, word order, and word inflection” (8); lexical, or word choice; discursive, or the structural organization of the overall text; and orthographic, or rules pertaining to spelling, capitalization, or similar features (Crystal 2001: 7-8). Furthermore, there are
often rules that govern the language of online discourse. For instance: in forums, there are structural and social rules in place in forum posts. A moderator (or mod) may post to remind participants what is an appropriate response for a certain thread. There are also different constraints on time. Crystal (2001) differentiates between asynchronous and synchronous settings. A chat room conversation, which allows people to interact in (nearly) a real-time setting would be synchronous (11). An online forum, on the other hand, would be asynchronous, meaning that conversation takes place outside of real-time. Because of this feature, and the format of the websites, turn taking is generally unavoidable online (Crystal 2001: 31-32), particularly on websites like Reddit and AVEN. Code, or the languages or varieties used by participants within conversation, as also governed by the users of a website: while anyone’s free to use a language other than English on Reddit or AVEN, it is understood that the overall conversation will be held in English and that, in the case of AVEN, there are different forums for speakers of other languages.

Barbara E. Hanna and Juliana de Nooy (2009) authors of *Learning Language and Culture via Public Internet Discussion Forums*, describe discussion forums as places where, “reader-participants are able to post to an ongoing discussion, with the expectation that all messages compliant with site rules will be published” (3-4). This allows for the possibility of a large number of participants, but also makes it possible for readers to come back to the conversation at a later date.

Determining whether or not asexuality is a queer identity begins first and foremost with determining how one might define *asexual* and *queer*. By its very nature, *queer* resists definition. Its history as a slur, and then as a reclaimed political term, has created expectations of what experiences make a community “queer enough” to be queer. For example, as discussed above, there is often a connection
between experiencing oppression and being allowed access to queerness. The prerequisite for oppression, so to speak, exists in tension with other accepted definitions of queer, i.e. those that base queerness on non-normativity. The presence of competing definitions adds further complexity and polarization to the discourse.

It is possible to analyze discourse occurring between these groups because of the relative safety offered to LGBTQ and asexual people by the Internet (Scherrer 2008, Fraser 2010). In addition to being a central place for discussion for LGBTQ and queer people, online spaces have the further analytical benefit of providing a readily available document of discourse. It is for these reasons I chose to collect data from online forums.

In the following sections, I will present my methodology for data collection and analysis. The analysis will be based on research on group ideology and polarization (van Dijk 2006), self-imposed and maintained boundaries between groups (Buttny 1999), and othering within marginalized communities (Riggins 1997), focusing on analyzing terms of reference for particular social groups and types, as well as different tactics people use to justify or condemn existing boundaries. This analysis, paired with the foregoing literature review, provides insight into the ways groups use language to decide who is included and who is not.

3. ANALYSIS

In this section, I will discuss my methods for selecting and gathering the data that would later be analyzed. I will also present my findings, and analyze and discuss discursive features seen within the data I have collected. The analysis begins with an investigation of the use of determiners, nouns, adjectives, and personal pronouns while referring to particular groups. I then turn to an analysis of the use of metaphors, similes, and analogies in the discourse, and an investigation of what kinds of evidence
bring to the discussion and how such evidence is received. While it is impossible to know for sure the original intent of the use of these various features, it is possible to infer the effects, in many cases.

First, a bit a terminology. In this paper, comment thread refers to an original post and the responses to it, which will be referred to as comments. Forum will refer to the space on a website where users are able to carry on conversations that remain accessible for an extended length of time.

Because Reddit, unlike AVEN, isn’t focused on one population, the comments from this website came from subreddits that were focused on asexuality, as well as those that were not. The goal was to gather 150 comments total from each category: AVEN, asexuality subreddits, and non-asesuality subreddits. The comments on Reddit were taken from four subreddits: r/asexuality, r/socialjustice101, r/changemyview, and r/doublespeaklockstep. In this paper, I will be using the following abbreviations to refer to the different comment threads: A1, A2, and A3 will refer to the three AVEN comment threads; RA1, RA2, and RA3 will refer to the threads found on r/asexuality; and RN1, RN2, and RN3, will refer to the threads found on non-asesual subreddits. One comment thread was taken from each of the three non-asesuality related subreddits, which all discussed asexuality and queerness, but from a non-asesual point of view. A full table of these explanations can be found in Appendix 1. This was done to bring viewpoints from both asexual and non-asesual Reddit users, allowing for comparisons to be made between the discourse coming from two different populations. However, Reddit only provided data from one website’s population. The AVEN forums were used to provide samples from a space specifically for asexual identified people and their allies. Among other potential differences from Reddit, in such an isolated space, people may feel more comfortable
voicing ideas and opinions that would be considered unwelcome in other spaces.

AVEN and Reddit both have search functions for their forums, and so all posts were found using the search phrases “asexuality AND queer,” or “asexual AND queer,” with AND being the search command used to find comment threads that contained both terms in the main post. Reddit posts were selected based on the following criteria: each thread had to have a 30-100 comments; and each thread had to be from between 2013 and 2015. To ensure the selected comment threads included a comparable level of back-and-forth discussion, or conversationality, between different users, each thread had to have a median number of children that was at least one. (On Reddit, responses to comments within threads are called “children.” Some comments have no children, while others can have so many that they have to be continued on a different page.)

The RA data had an average 55.3 comments and 23 posters per thread. Each thread had a median of 1-1.5 children per comment. All three threads within the RA data were posted in 2015. The RN data also had an average of 55.3 comments, though the average number of independent posters was lower than the threads on r/asexuality, with only 17. However, the median number of children was higher, with 3-3.5 per comment compared to 1-1.5 in the RN data.

Posts from AVEN were selected based on similar criteria as those from Reddit. AVEN posts also had to be from between 2013-2015, and have 30-100 comments. For comment threads that had more than 100 comments, only the first 100 comments were used. Due to different forum layouts between AVEN and Reddit, conversationality had to be determined differently on AVEN. Conversationality on AVEN was determined based on how many comments contained quotes from other users within the thread. At least 25% of comments within a thread had to contain
quotes in order to be considered for the data.

After finding data that fit the above requirements, I had nine comment threads, with a total of 593 comments. Each comment was then copied to a spreadsheet, along with the username of the poster, their sexuality (if available), and the response level of the comment. Response level was coded with 0 being an original post with no responses, 1 being an original comment with responses, and any numbers after that being the responses, or children in the case of Reddit, to that original comment. After the comments were added to the spreadsheet, they were coded for language used to reference different identities, any analogical or comparative language, and the use of any outside sources.

3.1 Terms of Reference

Data Collection

Terms of Reference was used to categorize any specific identity terms used, as well as any pronouns used when referring to groups. For example, in the following comment: “Maybe this post over at demiproblems would be helpful for you? Not feeling like part of the LGBTQIA community is a common problem that many demisexuals talk about (at least from what I’ve seen). But we ARE part of the community, and what your friend said (intentional or not) was harmful”2 (emphasis added), the terms of reference would be LGBTQIA community, demisexuals, and we. We would be taken to refer to people within the asexual community, or at least those who are part of t/asexuality. The possible ambiguity of pronoun usage was taken into

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1 LGBTQIA is an extended version of the LGBTQ acronym. It refers to ‘intersex,’ which used to identify “a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (“What is Intersex?” 2008).

2 “How are the LGBT and Asexual Communities Related?” r/asexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/3b4n6u/how_are_the_lgbt_and_asexual_communities_related/sort=old
account, and pronouns were coded along with the community to which they appeared to refer. Using the previous comment as an example, this would mean we would be coded as we (asexual). If the referent community could not be determined, the pronoun was labeled ambiguous. These labels later enabled me to analyze which pronouns were being used to refer to certain groups, while also allowing me to catalogue which and how many pronouns were present in each forum.

**Terms Used**

The terms of reference used when discussing asexual people were as follows: an asexual person, the asexual people, the asexual(s); asexuals; an asexual; we asexuals; ace(s); the asexual community; the asexual (x); and we/us, they/them. To refer to those who identified outside of both the asexual and LGBTQ communities, the following were often used: cisgender heterosexuals; cis-hets; heterosexuals; a heterosexual person; heterosexual people; allos; asexuals; and sexuals. There was greater variety in terminology referring to people within the LGBTQ community: the LGBT(s); LGBTs; the LGBT community; LGBT people; the gays; homosexual(s), bisexual(s), lesbian(s), transsexual(s); the gay community; gay people; queer(s); the queer(s); and the queer community. In addition to the aforementioned terms, the pronouns us/we and they/them were also used to refer to members of the LGBT community.

There was a noticeable lack of queer being used on its own. Of nearly 700 occurrences of identity terms within the data, queer only appears three times as a noun, and only once without a determiner. This will be discussed in further detail below. There was also one slur used in the data. The slur, “trannies” was used by a person who identified themselves as transgender, and seemed to be using the term ironically to support their belief that heteroromantic asexual people shouldn’t be
Canning 21

considered queer because they don’t face the same levels of oppression as other members of the community: “I also get angry about this because I’m Trans. That makes me part of LGBTQI. I don’t want the gays who get fired from jobs or the lesbians who get raped or the ‘trannies’ who get beaten to a pulp to be represented by the heterosexual person who just doesn’t find sex worth it.”3 This comment shows the tension between members of the LGBTQ community and asexual people, particularly those who identify as heteroromantic. In using a slur, this user further reinforces the dichotomy between us, or the LGBTQ community, and them, the heteronormative community that is the source of the violence—especially violence towards transgender people—described in the comment.

Studying terms of reference allows us to observe, first and foremost, how different groups name each other in conversations. As this conversation involves what many consider to be two opposing arguments, the way groups name each other can show biases and beliefs that may not even be intentionally divulged. The naming process can also show who is included within a community and who is not. Seeing which terms are prevalent, like asexuals, and which are rare, like queer, can show ideas about who is allowed to use certain terms, particularly with a term like queer, which carries its own political history. Naming also has the potential to give insight into which identities are considered “normal” and which are “abnormal,” an idea that is further discussed in Riggins (1997). Naming is a relevant and interesting; however, its role in discussions about the relationship between asexuality and queerness must await future research.

*Use of Determiners*

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Data Collection

The use of determiners when discussing a particular group brings with it a litany of implications, intentional or otherwise. For example, as discussed in Acton (2014), the use of the-DP (determiner phrase), often implies to the listener—or in this case, the reader—that the speaker is separate from the group being discussed. A determiner is a functional category of English that includes articles (a(n), the); quantifiers (every, some, many), numerals, and possessive pronouns (his, her, our) (Carnie 2007: 46). In these data, only definite and indefinite articles and possessive pronouns were coded for. When a commenter in A2 writes: “I don’t want to be part of the LGBT because, while I don’t particular [sic] care one way or the other about gay marriage, they are also about equal rights and visibility and stuff like that, which I don’t agree with at least in the terms of asexuality,”4 it is very clear that they see themselves as separate from the LGBT community. Even more, one could come to the conclusion that the separation is rather distant. More specifically, Acton (2014) finds that an individual’s ratio of the X’s to the bare plural X’s tends to be higher when the speaker is not a part of or wishes to distance themselves from the group denoted by X’s. In the present case, then, the use of the X’s rather than X’s for asexuals can reveal information about a commenter’s views about asexual people and the tenor of the discussion—and the same goes for the other terms as well.

Findings & Discussion

When analyzing the data from gathered from the forum categories, it was interesting to find that the asexuals never appeared, neither did the queers. However, the LGBTs was seen twice. The fact that the asexuals and the queers weren’t used by

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4 “How are the LGBT and Asexual Communities Related?” r/sexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/sexuality/comments/3b4nbu/how_are_the_lgbt_and_asexual_communities_related/?sort=old
anybody within the data shows that the contributors to this conversation may understand the negative implications—and sometimes even derogatory nature—of the X’s. Another contributing factor to the lack of the queers may be queer’s contentious history as a slur, leading to commenters feeling uncomfortable using the term. One term that warrants special attention is the LGBTs.

While the LGBT community is often perceived to be one entity, it is actually meant to be an abbreviation for the four identity communities the acronym represents: lesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender. One could argue that using a term like the LGBTs compresses those identities into one monolithic group. This effect is often seen in discourse involving marginalized groups, where the is also used as a way to signal “speaker-nonmembership” (Acton 2014: 53). Take the comment below as an example:

“As for cooperation, there’s reasons not to and there are reasons to. You may want to look into related threads in order to see both sides on the matter. The only solution to this matter is to support asexuals being with LGBTs as long as one respects the fact that there are asexuals who don't partake into working with the lgbts while supporting their decision not to get involved.”5 (Emphasis added).

It’s clear from the above comment, and the fact that the LGBTs was only seen in the AVEN data, that participants used the term to convey distance between members of the LGBTQ community and members of the asexual community. This would be an example of the othering of a minority (Riggins 1997), but instead of asexual people being excluded from the LGBT community, who might be considered by some to be a sexual majority in this situation, members of the LGBT community are being

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separated, or othered, by the asexual community. These tokens of the LGBTs thus suggest that separation between asexual and LGBTQ people comes in part from asexual people.

I now turn to the investigation of the use of adjectival identity terms as opposed to nominal identity terms. As I will show, the use of asexuals instead of asexual people can have the effect of showing one’s pride in their asexual identity, but may also have the effect of reducing them to their sexual orientation.

Adjectival vs Nominal Identity

Data Collection

The purpose of this section is to discuss the use of noun phrases as opposed to adjectival phrases when referring to a particular identity. An example of this would be the use of asexuals in place of asexual people. Drawing attention to the way identities are named can show how a person views their, or another’s, identity. If one person uses an asexual instead of an asexual person to describe another, it could be viewed as reductive, as if the other person is only their asexuality. On the other hand, it could also show pride in one’s identity, or tell others that asexual identity is something important to the speaker because it puts that feature of their identity at the forefront. This section will also include descriptions of terms using determiners, though in less detail than above.

A similar method was used to collect the data for this section as the method used to record the use of determiners. Each term was catalogued in a spreadsheet, where it was accompanied by the username of the poster, the identity, and the forum. In order to investigate the extent to which people used adjectival or nominal identity terms, for each forum category, I calculated the following ratio: Number of tokens of Asexuals divided by the sum of number of tokens of Asexuals and number of tokens
Findings & Discussion

The results are as follows. The rate of *asexuals* as a percentage of *asexuals* and *asexual people* together was 96% for AVEN, 21% for RA, and 20% for RN. These numbers indicate that *asexuals* was used most by participants in the asexuality-focused forums overall, but was especially favored by people on AVEN. *Asexuals* was used least in the RN forums, but not by far. There was only a difference in use of .01 between the RN and RA data. A partial explanation for the high usage of *asexuals* in the AVEN and RA data would be that it is much easier to type *asexuals* than it is to type *asexual people*. In a conversation based around asexuality and asexual people, it would make sense that people would elect to use the simpler form. The subject matter also lent itself to the use of analogies and other comparative language: "... *Asexuals* today get told the same thing the gays of forty years ago get told. It's a symptom of a disease, we just haven't found the right one yet, it's unnatural..." These analogies were used in all forums, but appeared frequently in the asexual-focused forums as participants compared experiences and beliefs about asexuality and queerness.

At the same time, these advantages for *asexuals* over *asexual people* should hold for all forums. If that were the only factor at work here, we would expect the rate of *asexuals* to be roughly the same for all three forums, but this is not the case. Instead, there appear to be additional factors at work here, given the huge gap between the AVEN data and the Reddit data. It could be that commenters on AVEN—a website entirely dedicated to asexuality—feel a deep sense of identification with their asexuality, for instance. On the flipside, perhaps some non-

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6 "How are the LGBT and Asexual Communities Related?" r/asexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/3b4nbu/how_are_the_lgt_and_asexual_communities_related/?sort=old.
asexual commenters in the RN forums see asexuality as peripheral for people who identify as asexual. Similarly, it may be that asexual commenters, being asexual, are feel licensed to use a potential reductive term to refer to their own group in a way that outsiders do not. In any case, the magnitude of the differences between the AVEN and Reddit forums relative to this feature suggest that the distinction is a meaningful one and worthy of further research.

There were also many occurrences of identities being used as adjectives, as in: *asexual people, queer people,* and *LGBT people.* This form doesn’t separate the identity from the people being discussed, potentially leading it to be interpreted as less derogatory *asexuals* or *LGBTs,* or their determiner forms, would. However, it does still lead to the generalization of an identity group, as seen in the following example from one user on AVEN, who writes, “If I were part of an LGBT community, I’d argue in favor that asexual people should be welcomed to it. *I have no opinion on what individual people identifying as asexual should do.*”\(^7\) This differentiation between “asexual people” and “individual people” is interesting, as it suggests that *asexual people* is meant to refer to the asexual community as a whole, not to a single person who happens to identify as asexual.

Overall, these data showed that commenters on AVEN were far more likely to use *asexuals* over *asexual people* than commenters on Reddit. While using the term *asexuals* could be considered to be an over-simplistic or reductive way of discussing an identity, it could also be considered a way to portray pride in one’s identity in a conversation that may discourage it. It’s conceivable that both forces are at work here, affecting asexual and non-asexual people differently, a possibility deserving of further

\(^7\) “Should the Asexual Agenda be Included under the LGBT Umbrella?” AVEN. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: http://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/112286-should-the-asexual-agenda-be-included-under-the-lgbt-umbrella/?hl=qucker
attention going forward.

Pronouns

Data Collection

Pronouns were coded according to their referents. The pronouns coded were:

- they (asexual); they (ambiguous), for unspecified group referrals;
- they (hetero-), which was used to signify the group being referred to was non-asexual and non-LGBTQ;
- they (LGBT); they (non-asexual). The codes for we were parallel. In the coding process, it was important to identify which pronouns were not referring to identity categories. Any pronoun that referred to another commenter or to an antecedent in the sentence was not counted. Take the following comment from r/asexuality, which discussed experiences had by asexual men: “It’s because society says that we’re supposed to be crazed homdogs who want sex 24/7. It’s fairly common for women in media to not want sex, but men have to be chasing tail all the time or they’re weird.” This comment uses we (asexual), which was counted. However, the use of they wasn’t counted, as it referred to the men mentioned earlier in the sentence.

Once the pronouns being used were determined, each pronoun was labeled based on the community to which it referred. Duplicates were not counted—if a comment used we (asexual) three times, it was only counted once in the spreadsheet, which cataloged the pronoun, forum and comment code, the full comment, user, and the user’s sexual, romantic, and/or gender identity, if available. Each comment was labeled to facilitate searching for comments in the full thread. A comment labeled A2Cl5, for example, would refer to the fifteenth comment in the second AVEN comment thread cataloged. This was used to determine the context of the conversation, particularly in the cases where the referent of the pronoun appeared to

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8 “Asexuals can’t Use the Word Queer.” r/asexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/3c6w8s/asexuals_cant_use_the_word_queer_its_cultural/
be ambiguous.

Findings & Discussion

As one might expect, pronoun usage typically aligned with the community of the comment thread. *We (asexual)*, which included the speaker as being within the asexual community, was most frequent pronoun-category pair on AVEN and in r/asexuality. Despite the prevalence of *we (asexuals)*, there were only three uses of the full phrase *we asexuals*. *We asexuals* was used differently than *we (asexual)*, and it was used far less frequently. In all three cases, it appeared that *we asexuals* could only be used in certain contexts, one of which was to separate asexual people from the outside queer and/or sexual world:

1. "...the term queer came about as a political response to heteronormativity. Since *we asexuals* definitely don't fit the straight-bonking heteronormative mold, we are effectively queer," ⁹

2. "...truth be told we are somewhere in between both realms of straight and not straight. Therefore, I deem it very necessary that *we ACEs* be classed differently that [sic] straight and LGBT.... ppl;" ¹⁰

3. "...[queer pride is] not about being proud, it's about being the opposite of constrained. *We asexuals* don't really know that fight. We don't have to 'hold back.'" ¹¹

*We (asexual)* was used primarily to discuss asexuality as a group the speaker was part

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¹¹ "How Are the LGBT and Asexual Communities Related?" r/asexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/3b4nbu/how_are_the_lgbt_and_asexual_communities_related/?sort=old.
of, and we *asexuals* seemed to be doing the same thing. However, *we asexuals*
included other asexual people within the forum who may have been reading the
comment, while also reinforcing the asexual community’s existence as separate from
another, to some, less favorable, group. And while more data are needed to establish
that this is a robust trend, *we X’s*, for some people in the conversation, suggests deep
association with the community in question. In other words, we may have here a case
of Horn’s (1984) “Division of Pragmatic Labor”; use of the more complex form *we
asexuals* signals extra meaning that isn’t found in the simpler forms of *we or asexuals*
alone—in particular, an extra degree level of identification with asexuality as a
community.

In the AVEN data, we see that *we (asexual) and they (LGBT)* are the two
most frequently occurring pronoun-category pairs, showing that, at least for asexual
people on AVEN, there is some polarization taking place. Of all the pronouns coded
on AVEN, *we (asexuals)* made up 40% of the pronoun reference pairs. *They (LGBT)*
made up 27%. The RA data patterned similarly, with *we (asexual) making up 49% of
the pronoun reference pairs, they (LGBT) making up 17%, and they (asexual) making
up only 7%. These percentages from AVEN and r/asexuality show the polarization
happening between asexual people and the LGBT community. This is seen in the high
percentages of *we (asexual)*, especially when looked at in the context of the
percentages of *they (LGBT)*. The dichotomy between the asexual and LGBT
communities is made all the more clear when examining the RN data.

The RN data’s pattern was opposite that seen in the AVEN and RA data. The
RN data had a much lower percentage of *we (asexual)*, at only 19% of the total
present pronouns. *They (LGBT)* also had a lower percentage of appearance, at only
14%. However, *they (asexual)* makes up 50% of the pronouns used in the RN data,
supporting my claim that polarization does exist within this conversation. The high percentage of they (asexual) in the RN data does show that the members of the RN communities feel separate from the asexual community. There’s also a separation from the LGBT community, as only 3% of the pronouns recorded from non-asexuality focused subreddits were we (LGBT). This finding suggests that the separation on non-asexual subreddits isn’t between the asexual community and the LGBT community, but between asexual and non-asexual communities.

The trope of us vs them is widely familiar. This prevalent feature can signal to listeners that a discussion involves what’s usually assumed to be two opposing groups, and in terms of actual pronoun usage and dynamics, the discussions analyzed here are no exception. Analyzing the use of pronouns in the conversation about whether or not asexuality is a queer identity gives a clear example of the way group dynamics, possible biases held by participants, and any alliances may influence the way discourse occurs. While not every comment using these pronouns is hostile towards one group or another, many did show the way many asexual people positioned themselves as separate from the LGBTQ community. However, the comments also showed how both asexual and LGBTQ people felt separated from heteronormative society as a whole.

3.2 Comparative Language

Data Collection

Examining comparative language, or use of analogies, metaphor, or similes, to compare the experiences of one group to another was a way to see commenters’ conceptions of asexuality and asexual people. For example, if a commenter compares the relationship between asexuality and queerness to, say, a white person intruding on a space meant for people of color, it may suggest that they do not view asexuality as a
marginalized identity. Comparative language was slightly more difficult to code for, as there wasn’t a standard way people used this feature. A few times, for example, a sentence would begin explicitly with “that’s like saying…” before the writer would make their comparison, as seen in the following comment from a user on r/asexuality: “That makes no sense. That is like saying that a bisexual who is currently going out with someone of the opposite sex has no place at pride”12 (emphasis added). Other times, a comparison would occur without an overt trigger: “My bi friends complain of invisibility and I find myself getting very annoyed: nobody thinks the B in LGBT stands for anything but bi! Ace is only in the extended acronyms and most of the time people replace it with ally!”13 In this comment, the writer is making a comparison between the perceived invisibility of the bisexual community to that of the asexual community. Comparative language wasn’t only based on other gender or sexual identities, though those did make up the majority of the examples; there were also references to other marginalized communities, such as those based in race, relationship structure, and disability. This was seen in addition to analogies based on food, as well as one seen in AVEN that was based on the concept of heterosexuality being the “abnormal” behavior.

Findings & Discussion

While examining the data, it became apparent that many people online chose to draw comparisons between asexuality and marginalized identities, probably because the overall conversation is based around whether or not asexual people are, in


a sense, oppressed enough to be included in the queer community. Analogies, similes,
metaphors, and other comparative language are used by commenters to draw those
unfamiliar with asexuality into the discussion. At the same time, comparative
language was also used by those who wished to claim that asexual people are not
queer, usually by comparing the oppression experienced by other marginalized
communities to that not experienced by people in the asexual community.

The analogies made comparisons to other sexual identities, such as
bisexuality, as well as racial identities. For example, one poster from Reddit
compared the suggestion that people do away with labels altogether to the response
“all lives matter” towards the Black Lives Matter movement: “Taking [sic] people to
get rid of labels smacks of privilege, like turning black lives matter into all lives
matter.”

There were also comparisons of the oppression faced by asexual people to
that faced by transgender people:

“Trans people have it the worst actually ... Trans people (particularly MTF)
are hundreds of times more likely to be murdered than your average person...
Give me one example of an asexual being persecuted, the worst they get is
some ignorant person saying ‘I don’t believe in asexuality.’ ...That’s almost
nothing compared to what other minorities go through, not even just gender
and sexual minorities, pretty much any minority group.”

In most cases, it was agreed that these experiences aren’t comparable; however, some
also felt that the experiences of the transgender community didn’t have to negate the
experiences faced by the asexual community.

14 “Struggling with Not Being ‘Queer Enough.’” /r/sexuality: Reddit Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL:
https://www.reddit.com/r/sexuality/comments/3bkauo/struggling_with_not_being_queer_enough/?sort=old

15 “I don’t Believe Asexuality ... Should be Included in the LGBT Legal Causes CMV.” /r/changemyview: Reddit
Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL:
https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/comments/1re24e/i_dont_believe_asexuality_and_its_variations_such/?sort=old
Asexual people also used analogies when discussing this topic with each other. For example, in r/asexuality, one poster wrote, “Many, many people would look down upon...someone trying to ‘fix’ a gay person. And yet aces get ‘You just haven’t met the right guy/girl.’...BEING GAY is seen as preferable because at least you’re having sex....”¹⁶ In this, the commenter is comparing the reactions towards people coming out as gay to those towards people coming out as asexual.

More than one commenter compared the argument that heteroromantic asexual people aren’t visibly queer, and therefore aren’t welcome in queer spaces, to comments made about the inclusion of bisexual people who are in different-gender, or “straight,” relationships. Another included bisexual people in the struggles faced by asexual people, particularly when coming out: “When it comes to Ace/Bi people, [discrimination] is less common but just as shitty. We get a lot of ‘that’s not real’ and ‘human beings can’t be asexual it’s against nature.’”¹⁷ Some other comments, such as the one quoted in Section 3.3, didn’t see bisexual people’s experiences of erasure and exclusion as being exactly comparable to those in the asexual community. The comment in Section 3.3 drew attention to the discussion which identities should be included in the extended acronym LGBTQA, in which it is debated whether the A should stand for asexual or ally.

Comparative language is relevant to the conversation about group polarization

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¹⁶ “Asexuals Can’t Use the Word Queer...” r/asexuality. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/3c6v8b/asexuals_cant_use_the_word_queer_its_cultural/


because the comparisons act to show who is like us and who is not. In this conversation in particular, comparisons to other marginalized communities serve to determine who is “oppressed enough” to be allowed access to queer identity. In many cases, depending on who is speaking, the comparisons serve to show who is like the speaker and who isn’t. Comparative language was used by all communities to police identity boundaries, whether that was by excluding others from their group, or excluding themselves from another group.

3.3 Citations

Data Collection

Analyzing the use of citations, or the use of outside websites or academic articles, in comments was the next step of the analysis. Examining citations gives us the chance to see what kinds of sources are upheld as credible and which are not. The use of outside sources can also be a way to exhibit authority over an opposing group. T.A. van Dijk (2006a) writes that sources can be used to, “Emphasize the position, power, authority, or moral superiority of the speaker(s) or their sources—and, where relevant, the inferior position, lack of knowledge, etc. of the recipient” (376).

Citations were labeled based on the appearance of a link to an outside website, which was then checked by myself; use of a phrase like “according to” or “X says;” and the use of any percentages or numbers. I also counted comments that included a well-known name or idea, such as Alfred Kinsey and his “Kinsey Scale;” Anthony Bogaert’s “1%;” and references to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which was used particularly when comparing asexuality to other “disorders” that appear, or have appeared, in the DSM.

Findings & Discussion

Some users decided to use outside sources rather than, or in addition to,
personal narratives or comparative language. Many sources were used to provide definitions of identity terms. In one r/asexuality comment thread, a commenter used Wikipedia to provide a definition of *queer* as an umbrella term for any non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation, as well as some information on historical uses of the word, such as its reclamation in the 1980s. An AVEN user also used an outside source to provide a definition of *queer*, though this user opted instead to use a dictionary. Many of the responses to this commenter showed that other users believed that this was not a definition relevant to the conversation, as it did not align with what they felt was the connotative meaning. Given the lack of access to research on asexuality, especially research housed in academic databases and journals, it was unsurprising to see commenters citing blog posts from Tumblr and WordPress to support their claims about asexuality. AVEN was cited only in the RN comment threads. The sources from AVEN came from their main information page and from the “AVEN Wiki,” which is an informational website styled similarly to Wikipedia. Unsurprisingly, AVEN was not a source that was cited by AVEN users, nor was it cited in r/asexuality, perhaps because it was assumed the participants in the thread would already know and accept the terminology. Four of the five AVEN citations in RN 1 were by the same user, and were used to show how the definitions and experiences being provided by asexual people were “incorrect” when compared to the information provided by AVEN. It was clear, in this case and many others, that using some sort of outside source was seen as superior to personal narrative or analogy. The fifth reference to AVEN isn’t so much a reference as it is a critique: “The study you linked is also not very representative of asexuals as a whole. AVEN, I know in particular, has a problem with diversity.”

Many more people used what would likely be considered "traditionally academic sources." Alfred Kinsey, a noted sexologist known for his Kinsey Scale, and Anthony Bogaert, who frequently does research on asexuality were mentioned both directly and indirectly in comments. Take the following comment: "Well, yeah, technically it does. Queer essentially means strange. I think if we're really 1%, that's pretty strange." This comment indirectly references Anthony Bogaert who, in 2004, published a paper in which he surveyed 18,000 British residents on their sexual attraction and found that about 1% of respondents said they'd never felt sexual attraction (Bogaert 2004). The 1% statistic is frequently cited in different research and websites about asexuality, though there is some debate about the accuracy of that number. Two specific papers were mentioned more than once: "Asexuality: An Emergent Sexual Orientation" (Morrison 2014), as well as "Intergroup Bias Toward 'Group X'" (MacInnis & Hodson 2012). These two articles may have been mentioned because they are free to access, making it possible for more people to see the data.

However, if a user was going to use an outside source, the other commenters were going to be sure that the sources were accurate. Citations were frequently policed and challenged by other members of the forums:

“You say 'gender study literature' and then don't cite anything. I'd be really interested in your sources, because the gender study literature I've seen on corrective rape doesn't actually look at asexual people, because there is a major gap in the research around sexual violence in this area.”

https://www.reddit.com/r/socialjustice/comments/2g6pr6/wherewhy_does_asexuality_fit_in_the_lgbtqia/?sort=old.


20 “Where/Why Does Asexuality Fit in the LGBTQIA Community?” /socialjustice101. Reddit. Date Retrieved: 21 Jan 2016. URL:
It was clear from the responses that participants take the presented sources very seriously, and are aware of the way a source can be manipulated to support or dispute a claim. Because personal definitions of *queer* or *asexual* can vary from person to person, and this debate is based entirely on those definitions, it is especially important to the participants in this conversation that “standard definitions” come from sources that are perceived as knowledgeable on the topic at hand. The emphasis on the credibility of outside sources can be somewhat problematic, however, as it could privilege the use of an academic source over the personal narrative of an asexual and/or queer person who is living the experience.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

This section will further discuss the findings previously presented in this paper. First, I will summarize the analysis and discussions about the gathered data; then, I will discuss possible implications and limitations of this research. Again, the purpose of this research is not to determine who is right or wrong in this debate, but to make note of the discursive tactics used by those involved. This research has the potential to offer insight into the ways boundaries between groups are formed and enforced by both those who are part of the group and those who are separate.

4.1 Terms of Reference in Polarized Discourse

Terms of reference can show how commenters view themselves in relation to the people around them. The importance of language in this conversation goes past simply naming one’s identity. Van Dijk (2006) addresses the many ways in which polarization can occur in political contexts, making the observation that polarized topics tend to lead to polarized discourse (734). The *us vs. them* dichotomy in this conversation wasn’t necessarily stated outright, but nearly everyone involved in the

https://www.reddit.com/r/socialjustice101/comments/2g6pr6/wherewhy_does_asexuality_fit_in_the_lgbtqia/sort=old.
conversation seemed aware of it. Out of 593 comments, there was only one that asked who they were: “Who's 'them' though? I [sic] there some sort of "queer committee" that decides what identities can and cannot be queer,”21 to which another AVEN member responded, “‘Them’- The current and established LGBT groups and LGBT communities and the leaders of said groups.”22 The blanket understanding of who they referred to on AVEN was also seen in r/asexuality comment threads.

In the RA and AVEN data, users were more likely to use we (asexual), than users in the RN data, who consistently had higher uses of they (asexual) than any other pronoun. This could be a sign of polarization within the discussion. However, the data does not show that polarization as occurring between LGBT and asexual communities based on the Reddit data, but between asexual people and sexual people in general. As I’ve established above, we see a very clear pronoun pattern on AVEN and Reddit that suggests polarization exists within this conversation.

4.2 Comparative Language

Many of the comments in the AVEN and Reddit forums were based around explanations as to why asexual people could or could not identify as queer. Commenters used comparative language to show how the different groups were or were not related. A phrase that was often seen was that’s like saying, which signaled that the commenter would be making some sort of analogy to further explain their point, or to contest a statement made by somebody else. I initially expected the comparisons to focus primarily on other sexual identities, and the majority of them did, but commenters also used race, historical events, disability, and religion to reinforce that their ideas were valid. This could be another indication of the

prerequisite of discrimination that accompanies queerness. In comparing asexuality to other marginalized communities, commenters were trying to validate, or in some cases invalidate, the claim that asexual people themselves constitute a marginalized population.

4.3 Citations

Language is used to show who is in conflict with whom, as well as which ideologies and groups are seen as more credible than others. In an attempt to show credibility, many contributors to this conversation turned to outside sources. All of the sources that were cited were freely available to anyone who wished to access them. AVEN and the AVEN Wiki were cited more than once, as was the article “An Emerging Orientation.” The article, which was actually a master's thesis, was available for anyone to download for free. Along with websites and academic sources, some people used personal narratives as a way to persuade.

It was never required that people use outside sources, and it didn’t seem those who used them were viewed as more credible. If anything, they were considered less credible, as people then demanded to know who they were citing, where they found the information, and how old it was. If the commenter was unable to provide that information, their comment was deemed irrelevant: “I'm not going to trust random blogs. I've linked to research papers and professional asexual organizations for my claims. Tumblr is not an acceptable source. Oxford University is. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network is...” Academic and outside sources could be disputed in a way personal narratives could not, leading to the possibility that personal


narratives would’ve been the more effective option.

4.4 Implications & Limitations

This research, as well as research done on discourse within other marginalized communities, has given insight into the ways these populations determine who is one of “them” and who is not. The samples from AVEN and Reddit show that the conversations online vary based on who is present and where the conversation is being held. In this case, I showed that in AVEN, members are using pronouns like *we (asexual)*, *we asexuals* and *they (LGBT)*, potentially reinforcing the boundaries that are already in place between asexual people and the LGBT community. The same was found in the RA data. The RN data serves as a way to show how non-asexual communities use pronouns, especially when determining and portraying where a particular person is meant to fit. There, pronouns used suggested a separation between asexual and non-asexual people.

As with many conversations surrounding marginalized identities and inclusion, the conversation regarding the inclusion of asexuality as a queer identity is often combative and confusing. The emphasis on proper citations shows that participants understand the need for accurate information and standard definitions. At the same time, citing outside sources opened comments to criticism in a way that relating personal experiences did not.

Focusing on online communities allows for the observation of language whose characteristics lie somewhere between spoken and written language. Online spaces are often felt to be safer than real-life spaces to explore one’s identity, and this seems to hold true for AVEN and Reddit forums. This perception of safety may also lead to people being less cautious, or more combative, when presenting their opinions, even if they’re potentially inflammatory or offensive.
It should be noted that the present research does have some limitations. Perhaps the main limitation was the relative difficulty of discerning whether a given user identified as asexual and/or queer. While AVEN is known for being for asexual people and their allies, Reddit is not. AVEN gives users the option to insert their own identity underneath their username, and that’s something the majority of users like to do. Reddit, on the other hand doesn’t typically do that. A few communities allow “flair,” which can be used to show some sort of image that the user finds relevant to their interests. There were some commenters in r/asexuality who used flair to signify their romantic or sexual orientations through a small banner with their identity on it, but the majority of them did not. The inability to verify the identities of the people whose words I was analyzing made it difficult to make any sort of statement about what asexual people were saying in comparison to non-asexual people. I hope to address this challenge in future work.

Having said that, the present research still marks progress towards understanding how boundaries between marginalized communities are created and reinforced using language. It delivers insight into the intricate nuances that affect the way an argument is presented, while also showing the effects on how an argument is received by an opposing group. Furthermore, this research shows that this conversation is not only about whether asexuality is queer, but is also about what constitutes the marginalization of an identity group.

5. CONCLUSION

The discussion on the queerness of asexuality is not one that will come to a simple conclusion. As discussed in the introduction of this paper, my goal was not to decide who has won or lost this debate, but to observe the way language is being used to delineate boundaries between online communities. Using forums to analyze this
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discussion offers a wide range of benefits, one of which is the ability for other posters to access the conversation over a longer amount of time—as compared to chatrooms, and especially when compared to a face to face conversation—with relatively little change to the original content. Forums also offer a perception of safety, due to the anonymous nature of the Internet, leading participants to offer opinions and comments that they would be less likely to share in face-to-face situations.

Though T.A. van Dijk (2006) describes some discourses as being polarized, and this conversation definitely falls into that category, polarization is rarely so simple as one group against another. This is apparent in varying kinds of polarity in the discussion. For instance, as noted above, we (asexual) was seen most often in asexual forums, followed closely by they (LGBT), but the same was not true of the non-asexual subreddits, where the “we,” if there was any, was primarily non-asexual people. Not only that, but comparative language was also used to reinforce boundaries between identities by drawing comparisons between groups considered to be oppressed and those that were not.

Analyzing the language surrounding the queerness of asexuality may at first seem too specific to be relevant to anyone who isn’t part of the conversation. I claim, however, that analyzing this conversation provides insights into group dynamics and their effect on discourse more generally, particularly discourse that may be considered controversial for one reason or another. Studying linguistic features found in contentious conversation allows us to learn how to navigate such conversations by giving us the tools to process beliefs and arguments we may not agree with. The inclusion of asexual people within queer spaces is not a topic that is relatable to everyone, but the circumstances of the conversation are. The better we understand such conversations—from the level of major themes right down to the use of
pronouns—the more we can understand how to.
## Appendix A: Forum Information (Table)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Forum Title</th>
<th>Comment Thread Title</th>
<th>Date Posted</th>
<th>Forum Code</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Reddit</td>
<td>r/asexuality</td>
<td>Asexuals Can’t Use the Word ‘Queer’…</td>
<td>7/5/2015</td>
<td>RA1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>r/asexuality</td>
<td>How are the LGBT and Asexual Communities Related?</td>
<td>6/25/2015</td>
<td>RA2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>r/asexuality</td>
<td>Struggling with not being ‘Queer Enough’</td>
<td>6/29/2015</td>
<td>RA3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>r/socialjustice101</td>
<td>Where/Why Does Asexuality Fit in the LGBTQIA Community?</td>
<td>9/12/2015</td>
<td>RN1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>r/changemyview</td>
<td>I Don’t Believe Asexuality…Should be Included in the LGBT Legal Causes</td>
<td>11/25/2013</td>
<td>RN2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Does Asexuality Belong with the LGBT Movement?</td>
<td>8/1/2013</td>
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<td>LGBT Allies?</td>
<td>1/14/2013</td>
<td>A1</td>
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<tr>
<td>AVEN</td>
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<td>Should the Asexual Agenda be Included Under the LGBT Umbrella?</td>
<td>6/5/2014</td>
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<td>Do You Think Asexuality Falls Under the Queer Umbrella?</td>
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<td>A3</td>
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Appendix B: Percentage of Pronouns Used (Chart)

Figure 1: Percentage of Asexual and LGBT Pronouns by Forum
Figure 2: Percentage of All Pronouns by Forum
## Appendix C: List of Catalogued Identity Terms (Table)

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<tr>
<td>(x) people</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x) spectrum</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>[det] demisexual(s)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Asexual (x)</td>
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<td>Asexual people</td>
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<td>Asexual(s)</td>
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<td>Biromantic</td>
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