

Gendered Discourse and Asexuality in Postmillennial Media

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Asexuality as a sexual orientation has been present in the media for several decades. The issue has gained traction in the early 21st century, after the publication of Bogaert's study on the prevalence of asexuals in the British national sample. However, within the past decade, two distinct changes appear to have taken place within the scope of media representation of asexuals: first being the shift of the representative figures of the asexual community from almost exclusively men to predominantly women, and second, the critique of the pervasive linking of behavior to sexual orientation, in this case, of sexually coded clothing to asexuality. This article examines these two distinct conceptual strands and their link to the gender of the asexual representatives.

Keywords: asexuality, discourse, media, asexual representation, Yasmin Benoit.

Asexuality as a subject of research has come a long way in the past decade. The focus has shifted from statistics and demographics to other valuable issues asexuals may experience in their day-to-day lives, and representatives of the asexual community themselves have helped raise these issues. Furthermore, the representatives of asexuality in media have changed themselves, from predominantly men to predominantly women. One of the topics often debated not only in academia, but also in popular media outlets, is the very definition of asexuality and how far does it stretch regarding activities which may be deemed sexual – e.g., masturbation, lifelong or acquired asexuality, romantic and/or intimate relationships of asexuals, or what asexuality reveals about sexuality in general. This paper focuses on the representation of asexuals in contemporary media, particularly online magazines and newspapers, to discuss the shifts in the representation of asexuals since the beginning of the millennium, especially regarding the interplay of gender and asexuality.

The current working definition of asexuality prevalent both in research and in the asexual community itself relies heavily on the concept of sexual attraction, rather than sexual behavior. The website of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) defines asexuality in the following way:

An asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who someone is. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently. (...) Asexuality is distinct from celibacy or sexual abstinence, which are behaviors, while asexuality is generally considered to be a sexual orientation. Some asexuals do participate in sex, for a variety of reasons.

(AVEN 2020: n.p.)

However, looking at the definitions of asexuality currently offered by the most prominent dictionaries, the reliance on sexual behavior and outward perception of a person, rather than the psychological experience of sexual attraction, cannot be denied. Merriam-Webster provides one of the definitions of asexuality directly from AVEN, claiming that asexuality may mean “not having sexual feelings toward others: not experiencing sexual desire or attraction” (Merriam-Webster n.d.: n.p.); however, other definitions provided by the same page relate asexuality to behavior and gender identity, respectively: “not involving, involved with, or relating to sex: devoid of sexuality” (ibid.) and “not having or showing a particular sexual identity: neither male nor female” (ibid.). The Oxford Learner's Dictionary and Oxford

Advanced American Dictionary both currently define ‘asexual’ on their website as “not having sexual qualities; not interested in sex” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries n.d.: n.p.), correlating asexuality with outwardly discernible ‘qualities’ related to sexuality. The Cambridge Dictionary similarly alludes to a definition based on behavior rather than attraction – whereas the definition itself claims that ‘asexual’ means “having no interest in sexual relationships” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.: n.p.), the example sentence provided furthers the image of asexuality being related to outward appearances of a person: “I must say I’ve always found him rather asexual” (ibid.). The Macmillan Dictionary simplifies the definition to “someone who (...) does not show any interest in sex” (Macmillan Dictionary n.d.: n.p.), obscuring the fact that some asexuals do participate in various sexual activities for various reasons (AVEN 2020: n.p.). In addition, defining what constitutes sexual activities may be rather problematic: as Kurowicka claims,

[the] blurred and highly subjective line between sexual and non-sexual acts highlights the problems with one of the more persistent dominant assumptions about sex, namely, that ‘real’ sex involves penetration, preferably of vagina with a penis. When asexuals describe their relationships and physical behaviours they engage in it becomes exceedingly clear that what ‘counts’ as sex is inherently individual.

(Kurowicka 2013: 4)

In addition, asexuals may engage in sexual activities for a variety of reasons. A 2013 article interviewed the contributors to the *Psychology & Sexuality* special on asexuality - one of the interviewees and a co-author of the issue’s editorial observes that

some asexual men and women find sexual activity of any sort to be repulsive whereas others value certain forms of ‘sexual intimacy’ such as hugging and kissing. Some masturbate and report having sexual fantasies, while others engage in a range of sexual practices because doing so is gratifying to their partner.

(Bishop 2013: 198)

This excerpt points out the wide variety of sexual behavior among asexual people, and also serves to illustrate one of the chief problems with including behavior in the definition of asexuality: that is, the inconsistency of delineating what constitutes sexual behavior. For example, the Encyclopaedia Britannica defines sexual behavior as “any activity – solitary, between two persons, or in a group – that induces sexual arousal” (n.p.). In Scaglia’s book *Human Sexuality and Asexuality*, sexual behavior comprises “the search for a partner or partners, interactions between individuals, physical, emotional intimacy, and sexual contact which may lead to foreplay, masturbation and ultimately orgasm” (Scaglia 4). Prause and Graham defined sexual activity for their study as “any contact with genitals or with female breasts [...] including stimulating a partner’s genitals or breasts with your hand or mouth, and intercourse” (347). Various behaviors can be coded as sexual by different people: hugging, masturbation, and even searching for a partner are included in these definitions.

This focus on sexual behavior rather than internal experiences and feelings related to sexual attraction creates specific issues when asexual people exhibit behaviors commonly understood as sexual. For instance, a British asexual and aromantic activist Yasmin Benoit has faced comments about how she cannot be asexual due to her work as a lingerie model. Benoit’s response to these accusations was that “[the] stereotypes around asexuality are that [asexuals] are unattractive, [they] haven’t found the right person, or [they] are gay and haven’t come out” (Jaffray 2019). Benoit added that she thinks she has changed “a lot of people’s views about what it is to be asexual and what you are supposed to look like” (ibid.) – a claim supported by her work as an asexual activist, and her creation of an Instagram hashtag

#ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike, under which many asexuals have posted their pictures in an attempt to challenge the stereotype of asexuals as simply so unattractive that they cannot find a partner (ibid.).

Benoit's case brings to attention the gendered approach in the discourses on asexuality. The gendered differences are even present in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association: while its fifth and latest edition from 2013 has allowed for the existence of asexuality separate from sexual desire disorders, it has also phrased the recommendations differently based on the gender of the person in question. The sexual desire disorders have also been separated into the female sexual interest/arousal disorder and male hypoactive sexual desire disorder, described respectively in the following way:

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 would not be made [...] If the man's low desire is explained by self-identification as an asexual, then a diagnosis of male hypoactive sexual desire disorder is not made.

(APA 2013: 434-443)

The inclusion of the word "better" in the case of female sexual interest/arousal disorder allows each psychiatrist to decide whether they deem asexuality a more appropriate explanation to the patient's experience than a sexual disorder. That is not to say that the statement relating to male HSDD does not allow for a similar possibility in any case – but the formulation does seem to suggest a difference between a state that can be somewhat explained by self-identification as asexual in case of men, and a state that can be seen as better explained by a sexual disorder in case of women. In addition, the formulation employs a different scale of how little sexual desire is required for men and women to be allowed to explain their state as asexuality: while the definition for women requires "a lifelong lack of sexual desire", the one for men includes neither the lifelong criterion nor the requirement for a complete lack of desire, talking instead about "low desire" (APA 2013: 434-443). This inconsistency could suggest that women are asked to validate their asexuality through the argument of a lifelong and unchanging state, as well as a complete lack of desire, whereas for men, low desire is enough for the possibility of asexuality to be accepted. Another potential conclusion to draw from these differences in wording could be that low desire in men is viewed as similarly clinically significant as a complete lack of desire in women, perpetuating the stereotype that "to 'be a man' is to be sexual, have sex, and overtly perform one's (hetero)sexuality" (Przybylo 2014: 233).

The gendered differences in the discourse on asexuality have also been present in media. During the ascent of asexuality to the position of an accepted sexual orientation in the early 2000s, David Jay, the founder of Asexual Visibility and Education Network, was virtually the only asexual spokesperson invited to various television shows and news segments. American Broadcasting Company (ABC) invited David Jay to their daytime show *The View* to represent the asexual community in January 2006. While explaining the asexual identity, Jay was constantly interrupted by the hosts, especially Joy Behar and Star Jones, with questions which pointed towards misunderstanding, or rather, intolerance, towards asexuality as an identity: for instance, why asexuals needed to organize if asexuality was not a problem: "If you're not having sex, what's there to talk about?" (*The View* n.p.). In another instance, Jay was accused of merely being repressed when he recounted the difficulties arising from not having any way of defining or understanding himself during his teenage years. Behar even explicitly claimed that Jay simply did not want to face what sexuality might look like. Jay was also asked to speak of highly intimate topics like masturbation: when he attempted to answer in general terms, stating that some asexuals masturbated while others did not, the hosts requested that he speak about himself personally. Jay's admission that he did try masturbating without any negative feelings

was immediately linked to the possibility that he had sexual feelings, after all, dismissing the differences between sexual attraction, sexual desire, and sexual behavior; his words that a sexual relationship required a lot of energy that had to be expended on thinking about sex were turned into him being “just lazy” (ibid.). But while these instances of dismissal of asexuality as laziness or repression could be read in a gendered way, a more prominent instance of gendered discourse appeared when Behar asked how asexual men could compromise in a relationship with a non-asexual person: “I can see it for a woman, you know, she can just lie there, but you?” (The View n.p.). This could hint that it was more acceptable, or at least conceivable, for a woman not to like sex and pretend interest for the sake of her partner. Jay related the compromises asexuals made to the way gay men could have sex with women, but Behar argued that the gay men who had sex with women could imagine other men, illustrating how the mental and the physical part of sexuality were linked in people’s minds. Further, Behar asked whether Jay liked kissing or cuddling with a girl and when he answered affirmatively, the host claimed that a girl getting aroused in Jay’s embrace might change his mind, perpetuating the stereotype that a man should always be ready to have sex, especially if a woman expresses interest. This stereotype aligns with the stereotypical ‘rules’ of masculinity as described by Kimmel: “Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet [...] the fear of being perceived [...] as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women” (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 148). Due to this perception of sexual predation with women as one of the inherent parts of masculinity, it became impossible for Behar to imagine that as a man, Jay would not become interested in sexual activities if he had an attractive and willing female partner. This not only points to the heteronormative perceptions in media, where it is assumed that a woman, not a man, would change Jay’s mind – it also shows how integral sexuality is to the construction and perception of masculinities.

In the same year, Jay was present on ABC’s prime-time news show *20/20*, in a segment specifically dedicated to asexuality. Labeled an odd choice, asexuality was introduced by one of the co-anchors, Elizabeth Vargas, with sensational condescension: “They say sex is highly overrated. Although, how would they know? Some of them have never even had it!” (*20/20* 2006: n.p.). Six asexuals including Jay were interviewed in much the same tone that Vargas used when introducing the segment. Juju Chang, one of the reporters, wondered about the possible “cause[s]” of asexuality, citing “hormones, genetics, personal experiences” (ibid.), although neither of the above might be the correct answer. The show also interviewed a sex therapist, Joy Davidson, whose opinions were mostly in line with the denial of asexuality as a sexual identity and the strong belief that being asexual was somehow unhealthy and wrong. The existence of asexuals who did have sex in the past, or who still had sex as a compromise with a non-asexual partner, was consistently omitted: instead, the therapist claimed that “sex is a fabulous, enormously pleasurable aspect of life and your saying you don’t miss it is like someone, in a sense, who’s colorblind, saying ‘I don’t miss color.’ Of course you don’t miss what you’ve never had!” (ibid.). Davidson’s statement would then mean that once someone had sex, there was no possibility of them not missing the activity or not wanting to do it again, or that asexuals needed to be cured of their asexuality to see how unhealthy they had been. Such an attitude is uncomfortably similar to the attempts to cure homosexuality in the previous century and indicative of the problematics of corrective rape, one of the most worrisome problems asexuals have to face. Davidson further suggested that trauma, abuse, repression, hormonal imbalance, or overt religiousness may be the reasons that predisposed asexuals to “shutting down the possibility of being sexually engaged” (ibid.), conceptualizing asexuality as a defense or coping mechanism in the face of trauma.

An early evening show of the MSNBC with Tucker Carlson invited Jay to talk about asexuality in March 2006. Carlson expressed just as much disbelief over asexuality as ABC’s

hosts, furthering the stereotyped belief that men were hypersexual by claiming that “the average man has a porno movie on a continuous loop going in his brain at all times” and that asexuals should be the most successful people because they were “freed from the enormous energy it takes an average person – average man – to think about sex all day long” (The Situation with Tucker Carlson 2006: n.p.). In this way, sexual attraction and sexual behavior were once again predominantly equated with masculinity and men. Other stereotypical questions surfaced in this interview as well, such as the topic of repression, or Tucker prompting Jay to try sex: “How about this. Why don’t you just try it once, and then you’ll know for certain whether you like it or not?” (ibid.). The language chosen for this suggestion implies a request for Jay to validate his identity by trying sex to prove that he would not be interested even if he had experience in what he was missing. When Jay opposed this idea with a question of his own, asking how many times he needed to have sex before his opinion was accepted as valid, Carlson compared sex to goat cheese, which people usually disliked at a young age, but after trying it several times, suddenly they started liking it (ibid.). Here, asexuality was once again likened to a child’s mind, to an immature state characterized by a lack of agency that had to be overcome with experience. Jay attempted to turn the argument around: “Honestly, did you have to try sex to realize it was something that you wanted to do? Do most fifteen-year-old boys have to try?”. While the show’s host admitted it “wasn’t a hard sell” in his case and thus his personal experience indicated otherwise, he proceeded to try and persuade Jay to have sex, “on the principle that everything is worth trying at least once” (ibid.).

MTV’s short segment in 2007 also described asexuality as an immature state, rooted in shame about sexuality while growing up (MTV News 2007). However, Jay and Henry Davidson, asexuals interviewed in the program, only spoke about disinterest in sex, not shame or fear of it. MTV’s segment became another one in the list of articles and shows that asked asexuals to validate their identity through the ‘Gold Star’ asexuality mentioned by Decker (2014): to be taken at least slightly more seriously, asexuals had to prove that they were physically and mentally healthy, socially well-adjusted and completely content with their lives. This approach could complicate the search for an identity when it comes to asexuals who do not fit into all the categories describing a perfectly healthy human being, whether physiologically or psychologically.

In the past decade, the focus has shifted from the one male representative of asexuality to predominantly female asexual activists. This shift may be reflecting the demographics of the asexual population: the AVEN website has organized an annual online census of the asexual community since 2014, following the first independent asexual census in 2011 on Facebook, and the data have consistently shown a high prevalence of women in the asexual community. In the first 2011 unofficial census, out of 3,436 respondents, 64.1% indicated their gender as “female” (Ace Week 2011: n.p.). Although participants were allowed to select multiple answers in the question about gender, only 14.1% selected the option “male”, either exclusively or in combination with other options, such as gender neutral, genderfluid, androgynous, unsure, other, etc. (ibid.). The 2020 census results are presently being analyzed – the last available complete data are from 2019 with 10,648 respondents. In 2019, participants were only allowed to indicate their gender with one out of three options: “male”, “female”, or “other”, with a follow-up question allowing a broader spectrum of gender identities. Out of 10,160 respondents who also indicated their sexual orientation as belonging on the asexual spectrum, 59.1% were female, 13.9% were male, and 27% selected the option “other” (Weis et al. 2021: 16), mirroring the 2011 data with the largest number for women, the lower number for gender non-conforming participants, and the lowest number for men. Interestingly, the asexual census also consistently provides rather high numbers of gender neutral and gender non-conforming respondents, which could potentially be explained by the societal pressure on men to perform overt sexuality as

part of their gender identity (Kimmel 2000; Przybylo 2014), thus complicating the process of claiming an asexual identity for men.

Media have begun reflecting this prevalence of women within the past decade. For instance, in 2014, *Cosmopolitan* interviewed two asexual women about their experiences, although they were kept anonymous: one of the women spoke about the severe underrepresentation of asexuals in general, and asexual women in particular, in the media she grew up consuming as a child:

Most characters weren't human (think robots, aliens, and monsters), and usually their real or perceived asexuality was something to be cured or overcome. It also wasn't something you saw associated with anyone coded as a woman, unless of course you needed someone to thaw her frigid heart. Or shank her for being a monster.

(Hills 2014: n.p.)

The asexual model and activist Yasmin Benoit, as mentioned previously, has been challenging this misrepresentation of asexual women with her presence in the media, as well as with her being vocal about the issues asexual women face. In a 2021 article for *Vogue*, Benoit describes her struggles with coming to an asexual – and aromantic – identity at an all-girls high school:

My nickname in school was “hollow and emotionless”. (...) I sat through the regular DIY sexuality tests, having my peers show me graphic sexual imagery, have very sexual conversations in my presence, and ask me inappropriately intimate questions to gauge how far gone I truly was. These tests lead to the development of theories, most centred around my having some kind of mental problem. After a while, you start to wonder if everyone knows something you don't.

(Benoit 2021: n.p.)

Benoit also pointed out the disbelief women face when coming out as asexual and/or aromantic. Due to the societal expectations that all women desire romantic and/or sexual love, “[even] in 2021, a woman who isn't romantically loved or sexually desired by their ‘special someone’ is perceived as being afflicted with some kind of life-limiting condition” (ibid.). Benoit's own life and activism offer a counterpoint to the claims that asexual women are merely undesirable: however, being a lingerie model, Benoit has faced criticism and hate comments claiming that she cannot possibly be asexual because she is, in fact, too desirable (Jaffray 2019). For instance, one of the comments on the documentary about asexuals in which Benoit starred during one of her lingerie photoshoots was “then why is she dressed like that”, referencing the lingerie Benoit was wearing in the video (Benoit 2019) and indicating that there was still a strong perceived correlation between behavior and sexual orientation, i.e., between the clothes people are wearing and how they identify. A similar link between clothes and sexuality was made by a young female participant in an asexual conference in Britain in 2018, as captured by a BBC Three documentary: “When I tried to tell my sister I was asexual, she said: ‘But the way you dress, you dress for men. That means you must want them in your life. And you must want to have sex with them’” (BBC Three 2018). Interestingly, a male participant of the same conference expressed a similar sentiment: “I do a lot of drag and cosplay, and I just love it. And everyone thinks ‘Why are you wearing sexy outfits for sexy films stars if you don't want to attract anyone's attention?’ I'm like: ‘No, I'm doing it for myself’” (ibid.).

Regardless of the pervasive linking of behavior and sexual orientation, the appearance of several YouTube channels run by asexual activists as well as several documentaries on asexuality produced and/or presented on YouTube have shown that YouTube itself has become an important venue for queer activism and visibility. For instance, Sky News, a British free-to-

air television news channel, produced a documentary about asexuality on their YouTube channel in 2019. In the interview with Emi Salida, a student, an asexual activist, and a YouTuber herself, the Sky News hosts appeared to adopt a rather positive view of asexuality: one of the hosts remarked that he considered it brave to brand oneself as asexual in public due to the results of the poll, which showed a low rate of knowledge about asexuality among the general public. Furthermore, the host made a comparison of asexuals to transgender people, in that both identities were underrepresented and often omitted from the media until the recent rise in visibility, which consequently helped more asexual or transgender people come forward with their identities. Sky News thus highlighted the importance of visibility and representation of minority identities in the media. In the Sky News documentary, Charlie Bell, a Sky News reporter, interviewed X asexuals about their identities, among them, Emi Salida and Yasmin Benoit. In the documentary, it was revealed during a public poll that while 53% of the interviewed Brits were confident that they could define asexuality, 76% could not define asexuality or defined it wrong (“Life Without Sex” 2019: 2:02). All asexuals interviewed for the short documentary explained that people generally misunderstand asexuality or do not know what it is as an orientation and that this ignorance often leads to rather intrusive questions about the asexuals’ intimate life (ibid.).

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the representation of asexuals in media has shifted, perhaps in reflection of the demographics of the community, from a mostly male perspective to an overview of several female figureheads of the community, often via self-promotion on YouTube or other social media, but also in mainstream media such as BBC Three. In addition, the link between outwardly perceived behavior and innate psychological realities of one’s sexual orientation is still pervasive in these media representations, and many asexual activists, especially, but not only women, are continuously asked to justify their asexual orientation in comparison to their behavior, i.e., clothing styles.

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