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**Not as Alien as You Think:
How Media Representation (and Lack Thereof)
Affects Asexuals**

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Abstract

This article addresses the misrepresentation and erasure of asexual people in the media and how that treatment can harm asexual people. The article discusses the differences between sexual and romantic attraction, erasure in the media, how disability and asexuality are often wrongfully linked together, and how all of these issues can culminate in trauma, coercion and corrective rape of asexual individuals.

Keywords: LGBTQ, queer, asexual, ace, media, representation, erasure

Introduction

Imagine that for your whole life, you've been surrounded by sexuality: Victoria's Secret, NARS, Calvin Klein, etc. all use sexuality in their advertising. In every TV show you watch, there's either a sex scene, a crude joke, or a portrayal making fun of a character not interested in sex. You've never understood the hype, but everyone expects you to enjoy sex, so you choose to give sex a shot. It's not bad, but you notice how your partner enjoyed it significantly more than you did. You feel like something is wrong with you. That suspicion is confirmed in your mind when you watch an episode of *House* in which an "asexual" couple ends up not actually being asexual, and the husband has a brain tumor that makes him asexual (Gray, 2022, p. 28). You assume you have to have something that suppresses your sexuality, and you decide to go to the doctor, but the tests come back normal.

In your desperation to find something wrong with you, you decide to do research to see if you come across the term "asexuality" and decide to turn to the media to see if you can find someone like you. But all you can find is asexuality being non-existent or shown as a problem that needs to be solved. So, you're back at square one, assuming that something must be wrong with you. Beyond fostering this self-perception of abnormality among asexual individuals, the hegemonic emphasis of sex in Western media creates a fundamental misunderstanding of asexuality across society. Such depictions result in erasure and alienation of asexual individuals, which has led to increased discrimination and even sexual violence against asexual people, causing around 32.2% of asexuals to have suicidal thoughts (Chan & Leung, 2023).

This paper asks how representation in the media affects how people view asexuals, including even how asexuals view themselves. The work discusses the difference between sexual and romantic attraction, asexual erasure in the media, the idea that asexuality and disability are

inherently linked, asexual discrimination, “corrective rape,” and suicide rates, as well as debunking the concept that people are more sexual than ever. Discussing this topic is necessary because it allows people who are not asexual to better understand the asexual person’s experience, with the hope of limiting discrimination and sexual assault against asexuals. Most non-asexual people tend to think of asexual people as “prudes” or to judge that “they just haven’t found the right person yet,” when that is far from the truth. Not only does the work help people understand asexuals, but it helps asexuals understand themselves better in a sex-obsessed world.

Literature Review

This paper focuses on how the hypersexualization in Western media has resulted in a broader misconception asexuality as well as a distortion of how asexual individuals view their own sexuality. In addition, the analysis to follow addresses not just the resulting alienation of asexual individuals, but an increase in discrimination and sexual violence against asexual people. Necessary for this discussion is first a clear understanding of what asexuality is, the concept of “acephobia,” and the distinction between sexual versus romantic attraction.

What Is Asexuality?

Asexuality is “a term used to describe someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward individuals of any gender” (LGBTQ Center, 2021). Asexuality is often referred to as “ace” by asexual individuals. There are conflicting reports on whether asexuality is a sexual orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction or a distinct identity of its own. On one hand, some asexual individuals are uncomfortable being defined by a lack of sexual attraction and instead may opt to use identity as being sexually attracted to nobody instead of an inherent absence of interest (Brunning & McKeever, 2020).

On the other hand, other researchers argue that it is a sexual orientation, but simply a unique one. If romance is considered an indicator of sexual orientation, as most other sexualities are (such as bisexuality also typically feeling romantic attraction to two or more genders), and a large group of asexual individuals feel romantic attraction, then it could be considered a sexual orientation (Van Houdenhove et al., 2017). It's also important to mention that the existence of the term "sexual orientation" only emerged due to criminalization and discrimination against homosexuals in Europe after the Industrial Revolution (Chasin, 2016). Recognizing the history of such terms can therefore be used to argue that asexuals are a sexual orientation due to the discrimination they face.

As a whole, asexuality is a very broad term and is the basis for other similar identities (which will be addressed later), so it is difficult to assign asexuality as an orientation or precise identity (Chasin, 2016). It is up to the individual asexual to determine what they would prefer to call their feelings and emotions on their asexuality. This paper will refer to asexuality "orientation" instead as an individual's "ace identity," or as a "sexuality," not in an attempt to choose sides but because, whether it is an orientation or not, it is still a core part of any asexual individual's identity.

Acephobia

Acephobia (or "aphobia") refers to the dislike or hatred towards asexual individuals based on prejudice (Queen Mary University of London, 2024). To illustrate how pervasive this treatment can be, Gupta (2017) conducted a study of how self-identified asexuals see their own experiences and navigate society. When asking if interviewees had ever felt marginalized due to their asexuality, more than half of asexuals answered: "yes," whilst around 25% answered some form of "possibly." Acephobia can also appear on a larger scale, such as institutionally and in

government. For example, in 2014, the Indian Supreme Court declared that if a spouse refuses to have sex with their partner without adequate reason, it qualifies as mental cruelty (Naraharisetty, 2022). This is discrimination against asexual people who do not wish to have sex and can pressure people into things they do not want. Another example is spiritual leaders expressing their views against marginalized groups and promoting traditional gender roles, such as the Greek Orthodox Church (Iraklis, 2023). This directly impacts asexuals and how they view themselves, not only as a marginalized group but also as their assigned gender at birth.

Whilst governmental and institutionalized acephobia is the most harmful, acephobia can be expressed in many ways, even by the people who are supposed to be part of a sympathetic community. Queer people don't always consider asexuals as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and are often exclude them from queer spaces, leaving them to feel isolated as if no group understands or relates to them (Comella, 2022, p. 197). Freddie (2025) speculates that this is to do with the fact that most queer activism has been sexual in nature and some queer people feel threatened by asexuals' sexual attraction to no one. Yet a lot of acephobia is also due to ignorance; a poll showed that while 53% of British adults believed they could define asexuality, 75% were either unaware that asexual individuals can have a sexual libido or were unable to explain asexuality (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022).

Sexual Attraction versus Romantic Attraction

Most people believe that sex and romantic attraction must go hand-in-hand, but 79% of asexuals nonetheless feel romantic attraction (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). People who do feel sexual attraction are typically called “allosexual” or “allo” (Graham, 2025). To understand the differences between romantic and sexual attraction, we must first discuss hookup culture. According to Merriam-Webster (2026), a hookup in this context is defined as “an act or an

instance of hooking up: *especially*: a casual sexual encounter.” Hookup culture is deeply ingrained in our society as well as our media. Garcia et al. (2013) in *Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review*, note that much of our media “has become a source of sex education, filled with (inaccurate) portrayals of sexuality. Many popular representations suggest uncommitted sex, or hookups, can be both biophysically and emotionally enjoyable and occur without ‘strings’” (p. 3).

But what does this have to do with asexuality? The answer is everything. If uncommitted sexual relationships and “friends with benefits” exist, why do we insist on sexual attraction and romantic attraction being together? If sexual attraction can exist without romantic attraction, who’s to say the other way around can’t be true as well? But what does romantic attraction without sexual attraction look like? In *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society and the Meaning of Sex*, Chen (2020) specifies there is no one definition of romantic love without sexual attraction. Yet she gives the impression that she believes that romantic friendship, as she calls it, stems from an intense infatuation, passion, and emotional intimacy (Chen, 2020, pp. 107-135). Additionally, Bolmont et al. (2014), in “Love Is in the Gaze,” state, “Love is not a prerequisite for sexual desire, and sexual desire does not necessarily lead to love. Love and lust can exist by themselves or in combination, and to any degree” (p. 1,749)). These views show that asexuals can, and most do, feel romantic attraction without sexual attraction.

Conclusion

We have found that asexuals feel sexual attraction towards no one and that there is no real way to place that into a box. We have also found that institutions, heterosexuals, and even other queer people can have some stigma against asexual people, as well as the fact that many people may be ignorant of asexuality, whether they realize it or not. We have also learned the

difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction, as well as how some people feel romantic attraction. However, there are very few peer-reviewed articles that focus on erasure in the media, let alone how that can directly cause acephobia and lead to trauma for asexual people. This paper will now endeavor to fill that gap.

Asexual Erasure and Misrepresentation in Media

Hypersexualization appears throughout Western media, which typically leads to asexual erasure. Perihelon (2019) in “Asexuality in Pop Media: Why Nothing Might Just Mean Everything,” points out how in the *Archie Comics*, the character of Jughead Jones shows a disinterest in relationships and was later confirmed to be asexual. But in the television series based on the comics, *Riverdale*, Jughead instead is in a relationship with the character Betty Cooper. The show’s decision to oversexualize its characters likely led to the decision to remove Jughead’s original ace identity (Perihelon, 2019). This distinct erasure of asexual representation isolates people who may have or did relate to Jughead in the *Archie* comics, but this also reflects a wider media trend, which can often lead to asexual individuals believing that they themselves need to feel sexual attraction and/or have sexual intercourse to be “normal.”

While it’s important to acknowledge that fictional asexual people are often erased, focusing just on fictional media depictions ignores the fact that real-life historical ace identities are erased as well. For example, in “Asexual Erasure: A Historical and Mass Media Phenomenon,” Val (2017) explains that many of Edgar Allan Poe’s biographers have speculated that he was asexual, quoting the notable Poe biographer Joseph Wood Krutch:

“Poe did not need women in the way that normal men need them, but only as a source of inspiration and care . . . Poe was never interested in women sexually.” Poe’s asexuality is

practically never mentioned and completely disregarded in his biographies. In the movie *The Raven* . . . he is depicted as extremely promiscuous.

Erasing ace identity of historical people makes allosexual people assume that being asexual is a new thing, and ace people who don't know they're ace believe that there's no one out there like them. North (2021), in "Erasure and Misrepresentation: Asexuality in Film & TV," states that "Sex is everywhere—it's in marketing, movies, books, and is generally portrayed as a universal need. This has led to a cultural misconception that sex and sexual desire are somehow essential to life and happiness, resulting in the asexual identity being largely dismissed and unseen." The misrepresentation of asexuality leads to asexual people living their lives with no words to explain how they feel: dismissal, shame, and repression of their asexuality. While asexual erasure being so common can be isolating for asexuals, there is harmful misrepresentation of asexual people as well.

Erasure and misrepresentation can also encourage acephobia from allosexuals by making it easier to dismiss asexuality as a new ideology. In "A Social Conversation on Asexuality: Queer Spaces and Media Representation," Gray (2022) describes how in Season 8, episode 9 of the TV show *House*, the episode "Better Half" depicts an asexual couple and invalidates their asexual identities. The episode makes an offensive joke, in which Dr. House "asks if his patient is a 'pool of algae' after learning she is asexual" (Gray, 2022, p. 27). Dr. House makes a bet that the female patient is not actually asexual, using blood tests to prove it. But when the tests come back clean, he manages instead to get a blood test from her husband, finding out that he has a brain tumor that affects his sex drive. Apparently, the woman lied about being ace to be with her husband, believing that they could "figure it out" if he started wanting sex (Gray, 2022, p. 28). Ace "representation" like this makes ace people assume that there's

something wrong with them due to their sexual attraction to no one. Depictions like this also add to the ignorance that allosexual people have of asexual people, in assuming that asexuality can't possibly be a real sexuality and they must have some form of disability affecting their sexual attraction.

Asexuality Is Not Inherently a Disability

Some people may assume that asexual people are inherently disabled and disabled people are always asexual, but this is born out of ableism (the discrimination against disabled people) and acephobia. Assuming that both are mutually exclusive invalidates both groups and isolates people who are both. Springrose (2026), in "Why Do People Think People with Disabilities Are Asexual?," notes how Hollywood only deems some bodies attractive, while disabled bodies are often not included in that, which leads to desexualization of disabled people. People tend to assume that disabled people must be asexual, which in their mind also means that asexual people must be disabled in some way. By combining asexuality and disability, the media tends to create a version of asexuality that opposes the sexual norms people are used to (Naraharisetty, 2022).

Due to this, the assumption that being asexual is abnormal has become deeply ingrained in our media. Burton (2025) comments that

Asexuals are thought to be mentally ill or biologically impaired; disabled people are seen as lacking sexuality. Because of this, both groups have a tendency to deny all relation to the other . . . which not only alienates the experience of those who are both disabled and asexual, but attempts to derive authority by distancing one identity from another.

This alienation is truly harmful to people who are both disabled and asexual. If it wasn't for the media alienating both groups and forcing them together, they wouldn't be so insistent on differentiating themselves from each other, which in turn wouldn't isolate people. It is also

important to note that linking asexuality to disability inflates allosexual, able-bodied people's misunderstanding of both groups, leading to acephobia and ableism.

Neurodivergent people face the same alienation as well, often blending with the alienation that asexuals experience. In "Autistic ≠ Asexual," McAlpinen (2018) emphasizes how the media often links autism and asexuality together and how that is dangerous to autistic people. McAlpine points out how autistic individuals are often infantilized, considering

how many implied-but-never-stated autistic male characters have long speeches to give about how they don't enjoy dating or even see the point in it, and women are icky, but they're not gay, etc. etc.? You know, like a little boy might talk about cooties but pull the hair of the person they're interested in?

McAlpine illustrates how people assume that autistic people cannot date or have sex, and that all autistic people remain at the psychologically developmental stage of children. Assuming autistic people are asexual supports the idea that asexuality is a mental illness. Grouping autism with asexual people alienates all groups involved and projects stereotypes of autistic people onto ace people and vice versa.

How Could the Media Possibly Affect Asexuals in Real Life?

The misrepresentation of asexual people in the media results in a misunderstanding of ace people in real life. The Human Rights Campaign (2021) argues that in media, characters that could be interpreted as asexual tend to be shown as

immature, shy or insecure rather than simply disinterested. This can lead many asexual people to feel like there's something wrong with them or to feel pressured to pursue sex.

Explicit asexual representation in media is uncommon, but when it does occur, asexuality

is often cast as a joke, or as an obstacle for a character to overcome when trying to date an asexual person.

Kennon (2021) similarly observes that in “Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity” observes that

As part of the “common narrative in our society – that sex is part of the package deal,” asexuals may be subjected to threats of “unwanted or coercive sex, particularly in relationships with nonasexual individuals” as well as the everyday “strain of maintaining their relationships through sex, of meeting their partners’ sexual needs, and of doing performative work to convince their partners that they are enjoying sex. (p. 12)

This “common narrative” is heavily influenced by the representation in the media illustrated by the Human Rights Campaign.

Asexual individuals may feel pressured to have sex with a romantic partner due to expectations of romance described above. Asexuals may feel a sense of sexual inferiority when it comes to being with a romantic partner and worry about the longevity of the relationship due to their absence of sexuality (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022), which can result in “unwilling consent.” Chen (2020) illustrates how many ace people feel pressured to say yes to their partners in a romantic relationship when they do not wish to consent to sex. Whilst she specifies how this isn’t inherently coercion, most ace people regret consenting once they realize they could’ve said no, which she calls “unwilling consent” (Chen, 2020, pp. 136-149). Unwilling consent is still a no, even if it is technically consent, and this can be incredibly violating to asexuals once they realize they shouldn’t have consented in the first place. When you are in a relationship, please pay attention to your partner’s body language so that you don’t accidentally pressure them to consent to something they don’t want.

“Corrective Rape” and Suicide Rates

As mentioned earlier, a lot of ace representation in media is “an obstacle to overcome” (Human Rights Campaign). Due to this, people may believe that asexuality is something they need to “fix.” However, this is incredibly harmful because it often triggers “corrective rape.” According to Hood (2022), of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, a 2015 Asexual Community Census Summary Report found that “35.4% of Asexual participants reported having sexual contact including groping or kissing that they didn’t consent to . . . 18.5% of Asexual participants reported having had sex due to social pressure from a partner . . . [and] 43.5% of Asexual participants reported having experienced sexual violence.” This report suggests a deeply worrying trend that so many people view asexuals as “fixable” due to harmful representation in the media. So many people think that asexuals must have something wrong with them due to the link between disability and asexuality, or a portrayal such as in *House*. If asexuals can’t exist simply as themselves, instead being treated as having a condition that others don’t understand, then such circumstances can truly cause sexual pressure and even corrective rape.

The acephobia and discrimination generated by the media also impacts asexual individuals' mental health. Chan and Leung (2023), in “Experiences of Minority Stress and Their Impact on Suicidality among Asexual Individuals,” observe that many asexual people feel an increase in stress and mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis, in comparison to allosexual people. They note how asexual people have a harder time in social relationships and may experience trauma, sexual coercion and assault, and that they may even be discriminated against in the hiring process or even renting due to acephobia, leading to increased suicide rates: “[...]64.8 % of asexual individuals had experienced minority stress [...] 32.2 % reported suicidal ideation, 10.6 % had suicide plans, and 2.7 % had attempted suicide in the past

12 months” (Chan & Leung, 2023, p. 801). The discrimination and acephobia that asexual people face can be really harmful, and it’s disappointing to see that in a world that appears to be becoming more and more tolerant, asexual people are still experiencing mental health problems, even attempting to end their own lives due to how other people view them.

Do People Really Have that Much Sex?

Due to depictions of hypersexualization in the media, many people may assume that people are having sex more than ever. However, Lehmiller (2025) disputes that notion. After conducting a national survey at the Kinsey Institute, Lehmiller (2025) states that “of the 1,500 adults who participated, we found that 16.5 percent of women described themselves as ‘single by choice’ and reported that they are not sexually active right now. The corresponding number for men was 9 percent.”

So, you may ask, why does the media place such an emphasis on sex and insist on erasing asexual characters? Because sex sells, of course! Archon (2016) argues that in our modern social media age, most people are insanely lonely, and to make up for this, we’re sold sexy shows, clothes, etc., but none of that actually gives us the bond we want in a relationship. In “Fashion Ads and Sex: Why It Sells,” Loeb (2021) echoes this same idea, referencing the Covid-19 pandemic: “The recent wave of sexually explicit ads mirrors our times. The ads reflect a desire for intimacy and the joy of being together rather than just focus on raw sexuality. They are often shot in ordinary settings rather than glamorous, sexy backdrops.”. This oversexualization is nothing more than a product, an attempt to make us think we’re not as lonely as we truly are. But what the media doesn’t understand is that a simple romantic partner or even platonic friends can be the true cure for this loneliness, not one-night stands.

The Relatives of Asexuality

Something that is important while discussing this topic is that asexuality is an “umbrella term,” a term used to group related words, things or phrases (dictionary.com). There are other sexualities, such as “demisexual,” people who only feel sexual attraction after forming an intense emotional bond with a person (LGBTQIA+ Wiki, 2021b), or “graysexual,” people who experience rare or limited sexual attraction (Wikipedia, 2022). Whilst this discussion has mainly focused on the broader asexual identity itself, as that is what most people are familiar with, these other sexualities under the asexual umbrella deserve representation as well.

The same goes for “aromantic” people, people who experience little to no romantic attraction (LGBTQIA+ Wiki, 2021a). As this discussion does touch on the difference between romantic and sexual attraction and how asexuals can feel romantic attraction, the opposite can also be true with aromantics. Aromantics may feel sexual attraction: they can be aromantic bisexual, similar to how an asexual person could be biromantic asexual. They also could be asexual as well, often referred to as aromantic asexual or “aroace” (Wikipedia, 2026). Aromantic is also an umbrella term, with most of the terms under the umbrella being very similar to asexual umbrella terms but for romance instead of sexuality, such as demiromantics being people who only experience romantic attraction after an emotional bond with the person (LGBTQIA+ Wiki, 2021). It’s important to mention while discussing this topic that aromantic people also face a very similar stigmas to asexual people.

This author’s hope is that this discussion inspires further curiosity about the identities described above and opens readers’ eyes not only to asexual people but to aromantic people and other identities under the asexual umbrella. Sources for further suggested reading are *Ace Voices* by Eris Young, *Hopeless Aromantic* by Samantha Rendle, *Ace and Aro Journeys* by the Ace and

Aro Advocacy Project, and *Intimacy Redefined: Asexual and Aromantic Relationships* by Thea T. Tristen (Pima County Public Library, 2025).

Conclusion

Asexual people are frequently being erased, alienated, and invalidated by Western media, whether this means being erased due to oversexualization, assuming that asexuality is a disability, or discrimination that can lead to coercion, corrective rape, and suicide. Asexuals aren't broken. We're not emotionless. We love, we cry, we get angry, we feel joy. We just don't feel sexual attraction towards anybody. This is perfectly described by an anonymous fellow asexual in an interview with *Varsity*, in using the analogy of a painting:

You think the painting is beautiful, but you don't want to take it home and have sex with it. That is not to say that people are "just objects" to asexuals, but rather that no matter how aesthetically pleasing they are to me, I just don't want to have sex with them. They are about as sexually attractive as a painting. (He, 2019)

If people can accept allo lesbians, allo gay men, and other queer sexualities, why can't they accept people who don't feel sexual attraction? Maybe society is just afraid that if people can accept someone who doesn't feel sexual attraction, what will the media commodify? Hopefully someday the world will accept us as ourselves, but until then, I'll be vouching for us, ace flag in one hand and garlic bread in the other.

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