

The Aesthetic Identity: Exploring Lived Experiences of Asexuality

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ABSTRACT

Asexuality can be defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards anyone or anything. The supposed omnipresence of sexual attraction as an important part of human experience makes asexuality an understudied facet of human sexuality and a relatively newer concept in public discourse. The focus of the present study was to examine the lived experiences of self-identified asexuals. A sample of six female participants was selected using purposive and convenience sampling. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview around intimacy, idea of relationships, psychological well-being, sexual behaviour, microaggressions faced and their concerns of being different, if any. The data gathered was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results highlight the experiences of being an asexual in a society that holds many misconceptions, their narratives about understanding asexuality and engaging in self-acceptance and reconceptualization of relationships. The implications of the study include de-stigmatization and bringing visibility to the group by bridging the gap between the asexual community and the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: *Asexuality, LGBTQIA+, Sexual Attraction, Identity, Sexuality*

While the prominent theories (e.g. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of mind and personality) trying to decipher and diagram the human psyche constantly put sex and sexual drive at the core or base of their understanding of being, the seldom studied nature of the term "asexuality" and the proportion of people it identifies (estimated to be around 1% of the population (Bogaert, 2004)) looms over these theories leading current scholars to question the ways of our being in the society with a broader perspective and greater insight and inclusivity. The study of asexuality puts many familiar terms (like 'sexual orientation', 'sexual identity', 'sex drive', 'sexual arousal', 'sexual desire', 'sexual behavior', 'romance') from the study of sexuality under new light of focus. To describe this sexual imperative system, words like "sexusociety" and "compulsory sexuality" have been employed by scholars (Vance, 2018). According to Przybylo (2011, p. 446) sexusociety is "very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity is for LGBTQ populations, in the sense that it constitutes the oppressive force against which some sort of organizing and

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rebellion must take place.” Elizabeth Emens (2014, p. 305, as cited in Vance, 2018), a legal scholar, emphasized how “ours is arguably a sexual law, casting asexuals on the outside in a range of ways.”

Asexuality is often confused with and was earlier conceptualized within the purview of hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and sexual aversion disorder (SAD) (Sundrud, 2011; Prause and Graham, 2007). Defined in the revised fourth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) as “a deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity” by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000, p.539), this definition of HSDD is exemplary of the assumption made around the nature of sex: i.e., the desire for sexual behavior is innate and present in everyone (Sundrud, 2011; Prause and Graham, 2007). These assumptions are reflected in the concept of sexual essentialism which is “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions” (Rubin, 1984, p.275, as cited in Scherrer, 2008). Some researchers have also questioned the biological or inherent nature of this sexual desire through their arguments focusing on sexual identity instead which is understood to be a product of social-psychological and politico-cultural influences (Rust, 1992, as cited in Scherrer, 2008). As ‘distress’ over the alleged pathological behavior forms an essential indicator of abnormality, the lack of distress experienced by asexual people regarding the lack of sexual attraction differentiates it from pathology (Prause and Graham, 2007). Presently, the diagnostic criteria for HSDD have been modified in the fifth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) to exclude and prevent the wrongful diagnosis of asexual people as displaying pathological behavior (APA, 2013). Asexuality also needs to be differentiated from celibacy as the latter denotes willingly choosing to abstain from engagement in sexual behaviors for perhaps religious reasons.

Conceptualization of asexuality involves establishing it as a sexuality and differentiating it from pathology. This conceptualization involves understanding the nuances of three terms: sexual desire (lack of desire for sexual acts), sexual behavior (engagement in sexual acts), and sexual identity (Laumann et al., 1994, as cited in Scherrer, 2008). Bogaert (2017) also considers asexuality as an important contributor in the understanding of sexual identification (Scherrer, 2008). While conceptualizing asexuality based solely on the former two hints toward pathology and the requirement for psychological or physiological treatment, research considering asexuality as sexual identity remains relatively missing from academic research studies (Sundrud, 2011). The existing exiguous research studies on asexuality present variably nuanced conceptualization of asexuality. With some suggesting a high threshold of sexual arousal among asexual people (Prause and Graham, 2007), and others conceptualizing it based on the lack of sexual interest (Carlat et al., 1997, as cited in Prause and Graham, 2007), sexual desire or sexual drive and sexual attraction (Jay, 2003, as cited in Prause and Graham, 2007; Bogaert, 2004), there still remains a lot to be discovered and learned about asexuality. This is reflected in the attempts made by the majority of studies on asexuality to focus on forming a definition and conceptualization of asexuality. Although significantly lower or lack of sexual desire, sexual interest and sexual attraction are common themes emerging from much of the literature on asexuality, it fails to establish a comprehensive understanding and definition of asexuality (Scherrer, 2008).

Asexuality as sexuality was brought into focus from the results obtained by Bogaert (2004) in his study on a sample of over 18,000 participants using interview method in which he defined asexuality as “having no sexual attraction to a partner of either sex” (p. 1). His findings challenged the well-established notion of the inherent nature of sexual desires.

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Asexuality thus became part of a puzzle, the shape of which was not constructed to accommodate for its existence within the theoretical understanding of the ways of our society. This incongruence between asexuality and the existing literature on sexuality is also reflected in the lack of awareness and discrimination that the asexual population faces. Bogaert's research based its findings on the assumption of his definition as reflecting the sample representing the asexual community. While the research by Prause and Graham (2007) involved both qualitative and quantitative studies and sampling of asexual people based on self-identification, their study primarily focused on the similarities and differences that exist between the sexuals and the asexuals (Scherrer, 2008).

An earlier inclusion of asexuality as a sexual orientation is found in the framework given by Michael Storms (1980, as cited in Sundrud, 2011) which was created after adapting Alfred Kinsey's (1948, 1953) continuum model of sexuality. Agreeing with the suggestion of Prause and Graham (2007), Storms also considered asexual people as capable of sexual arousal but lacking any sexual interest. The combination of emerging studies on asexuality presents a consensus regarding the heterogeneous nature of asexuality. This heterogeneity is rooted upon the branches of romance, subject of sexual attraction, gender identities and sexual behaviors. Within the asexual community, individuals vary on their subjective perceptions and understanding of sexual behaviors and romance. This variation is evident in the results emerging from themes focusing on love, sexual behaviors and intimacy in partnered relationships of asexual individuals. While some asexual individuals negotiate and set boundaries for their engagement in sexual behaviors when entering partnered relationships, others also seek to redefine the concepts of cheating, infidelity, pleasure and sexual behaviors itself (Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). The classifications within the asexual community commonly include demisexuals (who experience sexual attraction only once they have a deep emotional bond to another individual), Grey-A (identifying somewhere between asexual and sexual), (homo/hetero/bi/pan) romantics (prefer physical contact, intimacy, and primarily monogamous, dyadic relationships; Scherrer, 2008), aromantics (prefer friendship or lack of physical contact; Scherrer, 2008). As discussed by Scherrer (2008), asexuality challenges the assumption of sexual desire as a need even within discourses challenging gendered ideas of sexual essentialism. Discourses inspired by asexuality also emphasize the differentiation between romance and sex. Behaviors such as masturbation, kissing, cuddling are also suggested to not necessarily indicate sexual activity based on sexual attraction. Studies by Prause and Graham (2007), Brotto and colleagues (2010), Van Houdenhove et al. (2015) and Aicken and colleagues (2013) also report heterogeneity within their samples consisting of asexual individuals. Zheng and Su (2018) found similar patterns of asexuality in Chinese and Western nations.

The establishment of Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), an online space founded by David Jay in 2001, amplified the volume of asexual voices that otherwise remained snubbed within the societal boundaries set in concrete traditional taxonomies. As mentioned on its page, AVEN defines an asexual person as "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" (AVEN, 2007; as cited in Scherrer, 2008). AVEN provided the asexual community to realize, explore and legitimize their identities in a society obsessed with sex. The opportunity for maintaining anonymity, gaining information and communicating with people from all around the world makes the Internet a fertile field for embracing one's non-normative identity. Therefore, the Internet and especially AVEN become the most prominent sources of information facilitating the realization and acceptance of asexual identity by those seeking to find legitimacy and label for their identity characterized by lack of sexual attraction (Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008; Van Houdenhove

et al., 2015). AVEN also became the most accessible source for finding participants self-identifying as asexual.

The relation of the asexual community with the queer community is another hue in the spectrum of academic research studies on asexuality. Both the communities are considered to share a long-intertwined history of discrimination and presumed medical conditions (Scherrer, 2008). However, within the discourse of the legitimization of non-heteronormative sexual identities, asexual identities remain in negation as the discourse revolves around the assumption of universality of sexual relationships. Whereas, the establishment of asexual community along with the queer community can add to the progress in the movement to destabilize existing hegemony of heteronormative sexual relationships which define the norms for marriage, having children, parenting and family in our society. This performative narrative of asexual existence has been studied by Sundrud (2011) who takes into account the burden on asexual people to perform within the heteronormative social desires. Scherrer (2008) highlights the similarity between the asexual community and other sexual and gender identity communities as they find support in alliances representing and voicing the concerns of minority communities.

The Present Study

Asexuality can be broadly defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards anyone or anything. Supposed omnipresence of sexual attraction as an important part of human experience makes asexuality an understudied facet of human sexuality and a relatively newer concept in public discourse. The focus of the present study was to examine the lived experiences of self-identified asexual individuals. There is no universal definition of asexuality. Accordingly, most researchers seeking to study this relatively new aspect of human sexual orientation also aim to adopt methods and strategies so as to expand their knowledge of the spectrum. The present study considers self-identification as an integral part of an individual's sexual identity. Relying on the data provided by self-identified asexual individuals of their lived narratives of asexuality can help gain insight into the causal bases of asexuality and processes involved in its experience. With the notion of sexuality as an ever-evolving part of identity, this paper relies on the lived narratives of individuals who self-identified themselves as asexual at the time when data was collected. This is in congruence with the practice followed by AVEN which provides space for individuals to identify themselves with the term 'asexual' as long as it makes sense for them to do so (AVEN, 2007, as cited in Scherrer, 2008). This is supported by the argument made by Chasin (2013) as well describing the tendency towards an innate 'academic conservatism' that attempts to establish asexuality as a 'legitimate' sexual orientation based on a 'real' asexual person who possesses "all the characteristics of the ideal sexual person but is simply unable to be sexual and, therefore, should be accepted as asexual". However, the focus on self-identified asexual individuals as the participants in the present study serves to avoid this tendency. Sexual identity has been defined as "a description of the location of the self in relation to other individuals, groups and institutions" (Rust, 1996, as cited in Scherrer, 2008). While the innate sense of asexual identity rooted in biology remains a mystery, it is the social-psychological process of coming to terms with one's asexual identity and the lived experiences rooted in cultural-political contexts that forms the focus of this paper.

As researchers, our curiosities to explore asexuality arise from Socratic inspired thought around the nature of sexuality and academia's firm belief in sex as a fundamental human need. Research studies focusing on self-identified asexual people also allow for open-minded study of experiences of sexuality not yet understood completely by scholars. It

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allows for new narratives to emerge and inform themes not discovered before. This reflects researchers' reflexivity with regards to belief in the right of an individual to inform of their sexual orientation.

METHODS

Participants

Purposive sampling method was employed for the present study. A total of six self-identified asexual participants were included in the study of lived experiences of asexuality. Potential participants were approached through online platforms and offline associations representing asexual or LGBTQIA+ community. Finally, volunteers who agreed to participate in the study were reached through AVEN, Nazariya organization and Ace App. All the participants were female and identified themselves as women. The participants varied on the demographic variables including age, occupation, educational qualification, nationality and native language.

*Table No. 1 Table showing demographic details of the participants**

**Names of the participants have been changed to keep their identities confidential*

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Name	Shreyanshi	Emily	Dr Saumya	Max	Meher	Kit
Age	18	19	26	28	22	38
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Gender	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman
Romantic orientation	Demisexual	Aromantic	Heteroromantic	Bioromantic	Panromantic	Aromantic
Sexual orientation	Asexual	Asexual	Asexual	Asexual	Asexual	Asexual
Occupation	Student	Student	Neuro-physiotherapist	Dog-walker	Student	Software consultant
Country of residence	India	Sweden	India	United States of America	India	Canada

Measure

Choice of qualitative approach to the present study was deemed suitable given the research topic that requires a rich, nuanced, detailed data for interpretations of lived experiences of asexuality based on contextual groundings. Asexuality remains one of the understudied facets of sexuality from a psychological perspective and therefore, a qualitative approach to its study may help gain greater insight through collection of enhanced and elaborated data (Neuman, 2014).

In-depth interviewing is the most commonly used data collection approach in qualitative research. The in-depth interview is based on the understanding that people are experts on their own experience and therefore, most capable of narrating how they experienced a particular event or phenomenon (Lune and Berg, 2017). Based on the review of existing literature, a semi-structured interview schedule was prepared to conduct telephonic audio-only interviews with the participants. The interview schedule was designed to cover themes such as conceptualization of asexuality, social support system, discrimination, religion, trauma, impact on mental health and the potential advantages and disadvantages of asexuality.

Data Collection

Participants were approached through a circulation of messages about the research and its details on AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), Nazariya organization and Ace App. Volunteers who responded were contacted and briefed about the research and its purpose. A total of seven volunteers had responded but finally, the interviews could only be scheduled with six. No screening tests were used as the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of self-identified asexuals. After seeking an informed consent from each potential participant, the telephone interviews were scheduled with them individually depending on their time and date of convenience. Permission was sought from each of them to record the interview and they were assured of their anonymity. The interviews were recorded in audio format and transcribed using online document editing softwares.

Data Analysis

The strategy for analysis was guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). As defined by Smith et al. (2009), “IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences.” (p. 6). IPA follows the philosophical principles of interpretation, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. This allows for a subjective and reflective interpretation of the lived experiences studied (Reid et al., 2005). The opportunity to situate the data obtained within the context helps highlight the nuance in data collected from each case with reference to their culturally, geographically, developmentally diverse contexts. This enhances the process of interpreting the meaning-making processes employed by the participant. IPA is suitable for working with small sample sizes (Reid et al., 2005).

Following the guidelines provided by Smith et al. (2009), the analyses involved listening to the data again, transcribing the data involved, reading and re-reading the data while noting the initial impressions from the data, a thorough engagement with the data to develop emergent themes, grouping together similar themes to form clusters of superordinate themes, and looking for patterns across cases to identify similarities that may be embedded at different layers of meanings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this section is to provide the interpretative phenomenological analysis of each of the participants. A case analysis of each of the participants is presented to provide a context of their lives followed by a table of superordinate and emergent themes.

Case Analysis 1: Shreyanshi

Shreyanshi is an 18-year-old female student in a metropolitan city in India. She identifies herself as Demisexual and uses the pronouns she/her. She is an atheist. She is a part of LGBTQIA+ groups, which serve as sources of knowledge for her awareness on Asexuality and the LGBTQIA+ Community and mediums for her to express her identity.

She lives her family, which comprises her parents, her elder brother, and her grandparents, all of whom are aware of her asexual identity. Her brother is pursuing a degree in Psychology and regularly shares knowledge on the LGBTQIA+ community and other sensitive issues with her and her family. Shreyanshi vigorously voices out her lack of attraction. Shreyanshi’s family is open to conversations about her asexual identity as well as other societal issues. Shreyanshi claims that her family’s open-mindedness is due to the efforts she makes by taking her mother to watch informative movies about the community and taking them to the pride march.

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Shreyanshi defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction towards a prospective romantic interest. However, she admits that after developing feelings of affection and trust for a person, she might engage in sexual activity in limited frequency for her partner's benefit, which points towards the demisexual nature of her asexuality. Shreyanshi reported her frequency of masturbation being zero and the frequency of her watching pornography being 2 to 3 times a year. On a scale of 1 to 5, she reported her ability to reach orgasm while masturbating to be 1, indicating low solitary sexual desire.

The onset of Shreyanshi's realization of her being an asexual began at the age of 12, in 6th standard. Her participation in LGBTQIA+ groups helped her stumble upon the term demisexual, upon finding which she felt like the term was waiting for her all along, pointing towards her belief of asexuality being an intrinsic part of her since birth. Finally, at the age of 16, Shreyanshi labeled herself as Demisexual because it fit her identity better than the term asexuality as a whole.

Shreyanshi also believes there is a lack of representation of asexuality in the LGBTQIA+ Community. Shreyanshi is exceptionally upfront about her asexual identity, due to which she has experienced difficulty finding partners who would be accepting and open-minded about her sexuality. She believes having a relationship with an asexual partner would be suitable for both her and her partner because she wouldn't have to worry about not satisfying her partner's sexual needs. However, due to relatively a smaller number of asexual individuals, Shreyanshi admits that after forming an emotional bond, she might compromise on her wishes and conform to the norms of the society by engaging in sexual activity owing to her care for her partner's needs, even though she is not interested in the activity of sex. Shreyanshi throws lights on asexuals being considered sexless, having no ability to engage in the activity of sex, asexual identity being a phase, and not having met the 'right person' as some of the common misconceptions about asexual identity.

Shreyanshi consciously admits that her positive view of her asexual identity exists due to her privileged surrounding consisting of her friends and family who understand and accept her. Shreyanshi comprehends and attributes society's incognizance of asexuality to the absence of media portrayal of asexuality.

Shreyanshi has been a victim of sexual abuse but consciously denies her asexuality to be a product of trauma. However, she believes trauma may be a cause of asexuality for other asexuals. Shreyanshi denies asexuality to be the product of religious teachings, abstinence or celibacy. Furthermore, Shreyanshi believes asexuality is gender-neutral, however, she thinks the male gender experiences harsher reactions towards their asexuality than the female gender, owing to the hegemonic and toxic view of masculinity in society.

Shreyanshi believes identifying as an asexual person hampers her social relationships because she is selective about the friends she chooses and the relationships she pursues. She consciously becomes distant from prospective romantic partners based on their low acceptance and understanding of her asexual identity. Shreyanshi also indicates her fear of lack of personality development because of her poor social relationships as a disadvantage of being asexual in a hyper-sexualized society.

Case Analysis 2: Emily

Emily is a 19-year-old female residing in Sweden, Europe. She is studying to go into university, as well as working part-time at an animal day-care. She identifies as Aromantic

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Asexual. Growing up thinking she was broken and different from others, the onset of Emily's realization of her identity began at the age of 5 when Emily found kissing to be gross and did not understand the need for others to kiss. At the age of 14, she realized she was different from others when everyone started having crushes while she was not interested in them. To refrain from feeling alienated, at a young age, Emily tried to fit in and conform to the sexual and romantic norms of society by forcing herself to label her feelings of friendship towards an individual to the feelings of having a crush. Emily used the Internet as her source of knowledge about Asexuality which helped her put into words what she has felt since birth. These incidents indicate Asexuality to be an intrinsic part of Emily which she was born with. Emily states she is sex-neutral and is not affected by the sexual and romantic needs of those around her. However, she does not understand the conventional sex appeal stimuli, unlike most people. Emily labeled herself Aromantic Asexual at the age of 16, before which she identified as Grey-sexual, which iterates the importance of the Asexuality Spectrum and the evolving nature of Sexual Identities. Emily defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and a lack of need to engage in sexual activities. Emily reveals overcoming ace-phobia by accepting her identity and making peace with it.

Emily lives with her parents and her brother. She revealed to them at the age of 18 about her asexual identity. However, she believes they are ignorant and forgetful about her asexuality. Emily believes she has been privileged to have a supportive environment of friends. Yet, she describes an incident where her experience of lack of sexual attraction, was labelled as her having homosexual tendencies or misconceived as a 'phase' and her being a late bloomer. While conveying her wish to not get married, Emily's family subjected her to the misconception of her not having found the right person yet. Additionally, her being a virgin is obsessed over by others and is also misconceived as an important factor behind her identifying as an asexual, which points towards her deviation from cultural norms of having sex at a particular age. Emily reveals concerns regarding her need to not find a partner indicating her concern over deviating from societal norms of marriage and compulsion of finding romantic love. Being homeschooled, Emily finds her social relationships not impacted by her asexual identity but foresees such a hurdle in the future when she goes to university. Emily indicates struggle comprehending social cues and being cautious over others' flirtations due to her concern that they might think she's giving them the 'wrong cues'. However, Emily also expresses feelings of loneliness and the need to have a romantic relationship. In terms of attraction, Emily believes she feels aesthetic attraction, appreciating superficial beauty in people, towards males more than females. Emily's ideal relationship would be a Queer Platonic Relationship (QPR) which deviates from societal notions of relationship, by being exclusive to one another or having multiple partners, sans sexual activities. Emily's idea of intimacy includes physical contact such as walking and holding hands without attributing sexual or romantic connotations to it. Emily dreams of a family with an asexual individual or a sexual individual with low sex drives.

Emily actively advocates Asexuality through social media. Emily considers asexual people to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community because she relates to being subjected to the same discrimination as other identities in the LGBTQIA+ community. Emily states that there is a lack of awareness and information about asexuality and aromanticism on media and sex education by iterating its absence rather than its negative portrayal. To support the 'since birth' nature of asexuality and to state asexuality is just like any other sexual orientation, Emily denies asexuality to be a product of religious teaching or celibacy. Emily recounts and condemns asexuality being considered as a mental disorder to be cured using conversion therapy and corrective rape measures. Emily describes the gendered nature of

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sex by exemplifying the societal view of females to be 'prudes' and males to be hyper-sexualized beings, which might be a source of discrimination against male asexuals due to hegemonic masculinity.

Emily believes she benefits from being an asexual due to her having high levels of productivity because of her engagement in lack of sexual thoughts and activities. However, she feels disadvantaged due to feelings of being alienated from society by giving an example that the number of asexuals in the world is as low as the number of natural red-haired people.

Case Analysis 3: Dr Saumya

Dr Saumya Singh is a 26-year-old female neuro-physiotherapist currently practicing in India. She identifies herself as Heteroromantic Asexual who is sex-repulsed. Born and brought up in a Punjabi family, she resides with her family consisting of her mother, father, and a sister who is younger than her. She labeled herself as 'asexual' at the age of 20 after her sister suggested the suitability of the term for her. She describes having always felt a romantic attraction towards males and desiring a romantic committed relationship. However, she emphatically describes the absence of sexual interest and sexual attraction throughout ever since she can remember. She mentions that she "does not want sex". Her willingness to have sexual intercourse with her boyfriend once after she "fell in love" with him may be an indication of demisexuality.

Saumya does not consider asexuality as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. With hints of homophobia in her statements, she expresses asexuality as completely normal but reflects an internalization of the notion of abnormality as her mother scorns her sometimes putting her under immense guilt and resulting in self-blame. She self-admittedly suffers from depression and suicidal ideation. Her psychological health has been severely impacted by the lack of acceptance in society compounded by her profound yearning to be loved and married, constant pressure by family to get married, her recent breakup and her tendency to compare herself with her friends who are sexual and married. Her remarks indicate the internalization of gender norms and moral behaviors as prescribed by society. Although she was sexually abused twice and subjected to an attempted rape once, she asserts that asexuality is not caused by trauma.

Saumya's ideal relationship involves intimacy in a non-sex touch through hugs and kisses. Her ideal partner would be someone who understands and accepts her asexuality and does not demand her to change for himself or his family and someone who cares about her more than about society. Saumya acknowledges the hardships faced by an asexual individual in a patriarchal and marriage and sex-obsessed society. Saumya throws light on society and her family's several misconceptions about her asexual identity which includes the belief of her parents that she is abnormal, that she is scared of sex or has low libido or is impotent, that she lacks enough experience in sexual activities, her asexual identity is equal to being a nun. She talks about her mother's lack of support towards her and her asexuality by giving an example of when Saumya tried to die by suicide where the mother was more concerned about their image in front of society rather than the well-being of their daughter. However, her father is an immense source of support for her.

Her frequency of masturbation is zero as well as the frequency of watching pornography is zero. On a scale of 1 to 5, her ability to reach orgasm during intercourse with a partner is 1, indicating low Dyadic Sexual Desire.

Case Analysis 4: Max

Max is a 28-year-old female dog walker by profession, residing in New York City, USA. She identifies herself as a Biromantic Asexual. She lives with her mother and is open to her family and friends about her asexual identity. Max admits knowing only about her own Biromantic Asexual identity and not much about the other terms on the asexuality spectrum, which points towards a lack of awareness about the spectrum within the asexual community. Max emphasizes defining asexuality in terms of her personal and not universal experience as a lack of interest in sexual activity and a lack of sexual attraction towards other people. The onset of Max's realization of her asexuality began at a very young age when she would cringe at sex and kissing scenes in movies. She also believes she has always been asexual. This indicates her belief that asexuality has existed since birth and is determined by nature. Max labelled herself as asexual at the age of 20, before which, at the age of 18, she had labeled herself as queer because she dated men as well as women. However, she never wanted to have sex with them. This points towards the evolving nature of sexual identity as well as the lack of open discourse about various identities and labels within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Max states her identity as an asexual is central to her. This determines important aspects of her life being impacted by her asexuality. She further states that she is comfortable with herself, indicating lack of distress and acceptance of her asexual identity by her. Max states she is 'flamboyant' and upfront about her asexual identity with everyone, which showcases her owning up to her identity in a positive sense with a lack of fear of discrimination and care about the opinions of others. Nonetheless, in the beginning, revealing her identity as an asexual was extremely hard for Max because she lost almost all her friends and was constantly misunderstood by her mother. Max also lacks social support and often experiences feelings of loneliness as she states she lost a lot of her close friends after revealing her identity to them and at the end of the interview, Max asks the researcher if they would like to be her friend because she is still trying to gain wholesome friends, individuals who would understand and accept her asexual identity.

Max recounted being discriminated against at several occasions in her social circle with the misconception of her asexual identity being the same thing as 'asexual reproduction' activity of plants. This misconception indicated ignorance, obliviousness and a lack of effort by society to aware themselves about asexuality as a sexual orientation of an individual. Discrimination on the basis of a lack of interest in sexual activities of a person also highlights the obsession with sex and hypersexualized nature of the society where sex is considered a norm and those who do not engage in it are considered 'abnormal'. These acts of discrimination make Max feel degraded, estranged, unhappy, depressed and angry. In the past, Max has been upfront about her asexual identity to her partners but when they did not respect it, she has forced herself to engage in sexual activity despite her unhappiness. This showcases Max is an honest individual when it comes to her identity, however, lack of respect paid to her identity might have led to self-esteem issues in Max due to which she tries to please others as well as has had fear of disappointing them. She has often been called 'selfish' for being an asexual which may have put her in guilt which is why she feels she is making her partner sacrifice their needs which may make her succumb to the pressure and force herself to have sex. Nonetheless, in the present, Max states she sometimes slips but mostly stays true to her asexual identity and does not try to conform to the norms of society. This change could be a result of her positive acceptance of her identity. Max expresses her ideal relationship would involve romantic feelings but not sexual activities.

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To advocate for asexuality, Max is a part of AVEN which was initially the source of knowledge for her about her identity. Max uses online applications such as 'Ace App' (an online application for people who identify as asexuals), Instagram and ace-oriented groups on Twitter, and has also been a part of the New York City pride march, all of which also serve as mediums for her to express and explore her identity. Max expresses the hypersexualized nature of New York City culture portrayed on media and the negative attention drawn towards asexuality. However, she states that she does not let it affect her which points out her comfort and acceptance of herself as well as her understanding and acceptance of the culture of the society.

Some misconceptions which Max has come across as an asexual individual include her not having found the right person, psychological problem problems attributed to her as an individual, calling it a phase and her lack of experience in sexual activities. Max narrates that in religious societies, her asexuality is misconstrued as her being 'prude'. Nonetheless, Max believes her asexuality is not the product of religious teaching, celibacy or a negative experience. Max was subjected to sexual abuse at a young age. However, she consciously claims her asexuality is not the product of her sexual trauma. In terms of the LGBTQIA+ community, Max does not feel a part of the community due to a lack of representation and discussion of asexuality.

In terms of having a family, Max states her mother often pressurizes her to get married and have children. But Max is not interested in having children because she is repulsed by the idea of sex and considers being childfree due to her asexual identity as a benefit, apart from the advantage of feeling she is more productive than others due to her lack of engagement in sexual activities and thoughts. Max states her frequency of masturbation is zero as well as her frequency of watching pornography is also zero. This indicates a lack of Solitary sexual desire.

Furthermore, throughout the interview, Max is hesitant and apologetic about not conveying the right information to the researcher, indicating her low self-confidence and self-esteem, which can be attributed to her experience of her opinions, in terms of her identity, not being understood and accepted by her friends and family.

Case Analysis 5: Meher

Meher is a 22-year-old female pursuing post-graduate education in Political Science. She identifies herself as panromantic asexual and is sex-repulsed. Meher believes asexuality is determined by nature and exists in an individual since birth and could be attributed to specific genes in the body. Meher lives in Delhi with her family, which comprises of her parents and her sister. Meher has revealed her asexual identity to her family. Her mother remains ignorant of its existence. Due to her strained relationship with her father, Meher's mother and her relatives hide her identity as a protective measure from her father's mental abuse directed towards Meher. In terms of support, Meher is extremely privileged to have a circuit of friends who are accepting of her identity and also has some close friends she can discuss anything with. Meher cautiously keeps understanding and accepting friends in her life and ends her friendship with those who display offensive or homophobic behavior. Meher's sister and cousins are another source of important social support systems for her.

Meher defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction in individuals. The onset of her realization of being an asexual began in her teenage years when she was dating men but she assumed herself that she may be a late bloomer, or anticipated what others might say when

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reacting to how she feels. Even as an adult, she was never sexually attracted to anyone she was dating. She states being romantically and aesthetically attracted to them. At the age of 18 years, she realized she is not okay with kissing a man. Though an active ally of the LGBTQIA+ community, Meher assumed the 'A' in the acronym to stand for 'ally' and not 'asexuality'. This indicates a lack of awareness about asexuals in the LGBTQIA+ community. She was informed by a friend about the existence of asexuality, knowing which she felt relieved as she previously considered herself having genophobia before. This showcases that the societal notion of having sex is so generalized in the life of individuals that someone not wanting to have sex is not an option so it must be a problem to be cured, such as genophobia. Meher expresses her comfort exists in non-sex-related physical touch such as cuddling. Meher's idea of relationship included an individual who is non-toxic, understanding, and accepting of her asexual identity. Despite her issues finding a partner accepting of her identity, she does not intend to compromise on choosing a partner which indicates a high level of self-esteem and self-worth and acceptance of her identity. Having strong views about the institution of marriage in Indian culture, Meher believes "heteronormativity feudalism" dominates the society and results in the creation of norm of having sex.

As an asexual, Meher has been subjected to immense harassment and sexual objectification, stemming from a lack of awareness in society about asexuality and the asexuality spectrum. Meher has suffered sexual assaults by individuals wanting to explore her reactions to certain problematic actions as an asexual. However, she claims her asexuality is not a product of trauma. She has suffered from a lot of negative experiences with the men in her life. She is aware of hegemonic masculinity and is more attracted to other genders. Meher also highlights the relationship between gender and the normative view of sex. She describes the underlying pressure on females to fulfill the sexual needs of men after marriage. She indicates the blame is always put on women, whether homosexual or heterosexual, for having sex and even for not having sex. She argues that the role of women is often reduced to being reproductive machines. Meher also states female asexuals are subjected to harassment more than male asexuals.

Meher is an active advocate of asexuality through her social media presence and through her academic work. She has done intensive research on asexuality and has been a part of various organizations, both online and offline. She has written a research paper on asexuality and patriarchy and has written a book with an asexual character. Meher is also committed to create awareness about acephobia within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Meher throws light on common misconceptions about asexuality in the society which includes increased productivity in asexual due to lack of sexual thoughts which increases their level of creativity, asexuality as a disorder or disease, asexuality is the result is lack of experience in sexual activity, asexuals are homosexuals, asexuality caused by reading too much about feminism, asexuality is the product of celibacy, all asexuals are sex-repulsed and aromantic because love and sex are considered interconnected in the society. Apart from being subjected to misconceptions, as an asexual individual, Meher has faced severe discrimination. Instances of discrimination include separating her food plate at the workplace after she revealed her asexual identity, being left out of college events due to the sexual nature of the events, and facing insults at her political circuit not just because of her asexuality but also due to her belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. Meher states suffering from psychological impact due to misbehavior because of her asexual identity, involving feelings of not feeling that she is not good enough and feeling she has a disease

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which needs to be cured to feeling depressed. Meher also expresses her opinion and calls out mental health professionals in India for their lack of awareness about asexuality. This indicates a dearth of psychological help available to individuals who identify as asexuals.

In terms of media, Meher states incomplete picture of asexual identities is portrayed on media, which leads to most of the misconceptions about the asexual community. However, most of the time, asexual characters are absent from the big screen, which further enhances society's lack of knowledge about asexuals. Assuming sex as the universal and obvious truth and 'sex sells' strategy, media caters to the hypersexual needs of society.

Meher has had two-lifetime sexual partners. On a scale of one to five, her ability to reach orgasm while masturbating is three, while her ability to reach orgasm during sexual intercourse with a partner is one. This indicates a higher level of Solitary Sexual Desire than Dyadic Sexual Desire. Meher considers masturbation as a fantasy less activity. Meher indicates that she does not understand the appeal of pornography.

Case Analysis 6: Kit

Kit is a 38-year-old female, a software consultant by profession. Her family's native culture is Ethiopian but she has also experienced living in many other cultures. She has traveled to the United Kingdoms and Germany for the completion of her studies. She has two Masters and a Ph.D. She is a single mother and resides in Canada with her son. Kit identifies as an Aromantic Asexual and feels attraction towards no gender or sexual identity. She has been a part of AVEN for two years and states that she found the label for her identity later in life. She believes "it's all about the right time".

Kit defines asexuality, for herself, as a lack of sexual attraction. She defines asexuality as not an "orientation", that is, not directed or oriented towards anyone. She believes her asexuality has been a part of her since birth and is not caused by an external influence. Religion and culture play an important role in Kit's life. She was involved in church as a teenager and was drawn to the aspect of the church that preached sex to be a sin before marriage. As an asexual since birth, the church became her safe space where she was accepted for her lack of want for sex and she was drawn closer to her religion because of her asexuality. She misconceived the similarity and closeness of concepts of asexuality, abstinence, and celibacy.

As a child, Kit was always perplexed about the need for marriage and companionship of others. She was unable to understand the appeal and need for sexual or romantic relationships and attractions. Kit states that at a younger age, her ideal boyfriend was someone who would be like a brother to her. This indicates that Kit's idea of partnership is of having a protective male presence whom she can talk to, who will be close, and engaging in a non-sexual, non-romantic, reliable manner. Due to fear of being criticized or mocked by others, Kit kept her ideas of relationships to herself and tried to fit in by conforming with the ideas of others around her.

As a child and as a teenager, Kit believed her lack of sexual and romantic attraction towards people was 'normal'. This belief was strengthened and left unquestioned by Kit at the time because of a lack of open dialogue about sexual activity and sexual attraction in her culture owing to the expectations of moralist or 'good girl' nature of females. The onset of Kit's realization of her asexual identity began at the age of 20 years. In college, Kit was in an emotional, non-sexual, non-physical, relationship with a man who was practicing abstinence

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from sex before marriage. This abstinence drew Kit to the man, yet after a while, he admitted his abstinence is difficult for him which was hard for Kit to comprehend. The man was the first person to make Kit realize that something is different, deviating from societal norms of sex about her. Kit was inept at comprehending social cues of flirting, romance, and sexual appeal directed towards her. The man accused Kit to be acting like a prude or ‘good girl’, as dictated by their cultural norms, which caused a harmful psychological impact on Kit and led her to believe she was “broken” and different from others. After being apart for years, Kit met the man again after she completed her Ph.D. and got married to the man. Kit always loved him like a brother and differentiated between love and sex, however, such was not the case for her husband. Kit believed sex was an activity for the sole purpose of reproduction and not for continuous pleasure in a relationship. Kit’s lack of interest in sexual activity was misconceived by her husband who believed she was cheating on him. This indicates that the idea of sex as a norm is so deeply ingrained in society that encountering someone who does not want sex is so unimaginable that it is easier to believe that the person must be cheating. Unable to understand Kit’s sexual identity, the man separated from her on the note that his prior sexual relations were better than what he has with Kit. Kit states her ideal relationship and intimacy would involve emotional connection which is platonic and not romantic, sexual or physical in nature.

Finally, this led Kit to search online about her feelings which led her to the term ‘Asexuality’. Upon finding the term, Kit researched about it for months, finding it to be the right label for her. This showcases the importance of labels in providing a sense of coherence, validation, conclusion, and closure. Kit joined AVEN at the age of 37 years. It serves as a safe space for her to explore her identity and advocate towards the visibility of asexuality as a minority identity. AVEN also became her social support due to the presence of single mothers and other females she could relate to. Kit states after finding AVEN, she became comfortable with herself and found ‘her happy ending’, which indicates finding social support, finding out who she really is, and not being forced to have sex.

Kit states having beliefs that religion may have a correlation with asexuality but after being countered by her friends at AVEN, she stopped believing it. The correlation of religion and asexuality can perhaps be explained by the fact that church provides solace and acceptance to those who do not wish to engage in sexual activity, even if for other reasons. Kit states it is easier for asexuals to get into church or take positions there to make their life easier, which is what might draw asexual individuals towards religion. In terms of gender and asexuality, Kit believes out of 1% asexuals in the world, 0.5% of them are women and women have it worse. She states that as per cultural norms, the choices of men are not questioned whereas, for women, the societal expectation of marriage and reproduction hinders the well-being of female asexuals more than other genders. Kit does not believe that asexuality is a product of trauma because sexual individuals with trauma can regain their sexual interest by obtaining psychological help. In terms of the LGBTQIA+ community, Kit feels a part of the community because of the same struggles and discrimination as other members of the community. However, Kit states that asexual individuals are subjected to more discrimination than homosexual individuals in her culture.

Kit threw light upon the timeline of life events and the ages of those events fixed by society and the expectation of fulfilling them. According to Kit, the societal norm of having sex after marriage has become law more than a norm. This points towards the idea that heteronormative societal norms become laws because there is a lack of understanding and concern for the minority, which in this case is the asexual community.

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Kit's family comprises of her parents and her siblings. Having confided in her father since a young age, Kit's father understands her, though she suspects he might be confusing it with celibacy, Kit's sister does not understand her and believes Kit might have a psychological problem. Kit is upfront and open about her identity as an asexual and is unafraid of defying the societal expectation of marriage or having a family. However, even though Kit did not understand the concept of companionship, due to her growing age she is realizing the importance of it. For Kit, a challenge of being an asexual is finding a partner who understands her lack of interest in sexual activity. However, being an asexual, Kit has to compromise and engage in sexual activity for the sake of finding a partner who would provide her companionship. Similarly, despite being upfront and an advocate for asexuality, Kit experiences fear of discrimination, judgment, and seeming "weird" to her co-workers for being an asexual, despite anti-discriminatory laws for the LGBTQIA+ community. She experienced mental health issues due to her attempts at "fitting in". This indicates the harmful consequences asexuals experience when trying to deviate from societal norms.

Kit believes asexuality is not portrayed in mainstream media and no movies showcase asexuality, however, a few books do. Kit highlights several misconceptions of others about asexuality, such as asexuality as a phase, that asexuals have not found the right person yet or asexuals have a psychological problem, the person is homosexual or is repressing their sexual tendencies.

Kit believes an advantage of being asexual is being more productive than others due to her lack of engagement and distraction by sexual activities and men. Kit states she masturbates a few times a year and on a scale of 1 to 5, her ability to reach orgasm while masturbating is 5, which indicates high Solitary Sexual Desire. Kit has had two-lifetime sexual partners and on a scale of 1 to 5, her ability to reach orgasm during sexual intercourse with a partner is 1, which indicates low Dyadic Sexual Desire. However, she finds masturbation and having sex with a partner, both boring, yet she chooses Solitary over Dyadic. Her frequency of watching pornography is zero.

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Cross-case analysis helps identify patterns across the cases studied. Following an emphasis on the idiosyncratic narratives of the participants and the unique meaning of those lived experiences for each, the patterns across cases can be formulated into master themes to highlight the similarities in their experiences and present them in a comprehensive format. Several master themes as presented below were identified across the cases mapping the similarities in their conceptualization of asexuality, sources of information available to them, the many misconceptions they deal with, the struggles associated with lack of acceptance among close relationships and society, and the consequent psychological impacts on the participants' mental health. These master themes have been elaborated through subordinate themes and discussed with reference to existing literature and evidence. Verbatim excerpts have been presented to develop and support the interpretations of the data.

Asexuality as a spectrum

The first master theme concerns the conceptualization of asexuality as a spectrum consisting of many dimensions. It also highlights the distinctions between the different attitudes towards sex and the compartmentalization of sex and love as two different constructs.

Lack of sexual interest and sexual attraction

The definitions provided by most participants vehemently expressed a lack of sexual interest and sexual attraction. While many emphasized on the behavioral aspect of sexual interest, others emphasized on the lack of sexual attraction towards anyone. Even for a participant who identified herself as demisexual, the willingness to engage in sexual activity was characterized by a low frequency. Bogaert (2004) operationalized asexuality as identifying individuals who “have never felt sexual attraction to anyone at all” (p. 279). Scherrer (2008) also found the most common definition of asexuality as provided by the participants to emphasize on the inexperience of sexual attraction.

As described by the emphasis placed by Saumya on the normalcy of asexuals and the repetition focusing on the behavioral component of sex and their lack of interest in it may be indicative of attempts made to convey the normalization of not wanting sex to avoid being considered as abnormal and as a challenge to the assumption of sexual imperative system:

“I don't know what society thinks and what you are thinking, asexuality is normal, we all are normal human beings, okay?”

“That's one thing if we do not feel like doing it or we don't want to do it, if you tell us we can do it. Everything is normal. Our hormones work normally, okay?”

As argued by Shreyanshi, many people confuse asexuality to mean ‘sexless’ thereby questioning the sexual identities of self-identified asexuals who have engaged in sexual behaviors. This reflects a deep unawareness of the meaning of asexuality and its many facets varying in the description of sexual desire experienced.

“Being asexual is considered same as sexless basically. It can't happen. That's the thing the inter terms like demisexuality, asexuality, a romantic and all. So, basically, if I say I am asexual, they will ask what is asexual then I will be like someone who doesn't feel sexual attraction at all and then they will be like so you will not have sex for your whole life? That is the thing, they think that if you are asexual, you will not have, you can't have basically and the thing is that you can have sex but it depends on the individual.”

Distinction between sexuality and romance

Asexual identities go beyond the mere description of lack of sexual interest or sexual attraction and are rather the outcome of intersection between sexual desire and romance. The description of sexual desire can range from a complete absence of/aversion to sexual desire (‘asexual’, ‘sex-repulsed’) to the development of sexual desire once an emotional bond has developed (‘demisexual’) and to those in the ‘grey area’ between asexuality and forms of sexual desire (‘grey-a’). These variations in sexual desire are further supplemented by variations in the amount of romantic attraction (‘aromantic’ or ‘romantic’) and the object of such romantic attractions (for example, ‘homoromantic’, ‘biromantic’, ‘heteroromantic’, ‘panromantic’) (Dawson et al., 2018). Two participants identified themselves as aromantic asexuals while the remaining four identified themselves as biromantic asexual, panromantic asexual, heteroromantic asexual and demisexual with no specific reference to romantic orientation. Our finding that sex and love are distinct constructs for asexuals is supported by Haefner (2011). For the participants in our study, they can love someone without having sex with them just as some people can have sex without loving someone.

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Similar to the findings of Scherrer (2008), our study also found variation in the behaviors that the participants considered sexual or romantic. Another term that was important in the expression of many participants was the “aesthetic attraction” that they experienced. As described by the participants who identified themselves as aromantic asexual and panromantic asexual, aesthetic attraction was related to their attraction and appreciation for ‘beauty’. For some participants this was also reflected in their complete dismissal of the word “sexy” owing to the lack of sexual attraction experienced by them:

“No, that word sexy does not exist. Because I am a girl who wears every cloth, even bikini, swimsuit bikinis and someone calling me hot and sexy, I just tell them do not use these words for me. These are not made for me. I don't like these words.”

“No, I don't use this term. I always say they are beautiful, they are cute, etc.”

“I perceive her to be cute as in cute that I want to cuddle with her. Someone comes and says that ‘that girl looks sexy’ and I only reply with ‘okay, you perceive her as sexy’.”

Attitude towards sex (sex positive, sex negative, sex neutral, sex repulsed)

Most of the participants in the study reported sex-repulsive attitudes whereas one reported sex-neutrality. These attitudes did not show any pattern across romantic orientations. The emotions most associated with sex-repulsion were disgust and distress. Some participants reported behavioral reactions ranging from cringe to emesis in response to any sexual stimuli:

“I used to avoid sexual things and I told every guy who proposed me to not do all these things to do on phone or like that. You won't have any conversation like this then only I will tell you a yes otherwise it's a no from me because it is a mental emotional physical torture for me, I start vomiting. That much, I am that much sex repulse.”

Other participants reported negative emotions attributed to their engagement in sexual activities for the sake of their partner's pleasure but without any expression of disgust. All the participants, except one, understood why others felt the urge to engage in sexual behaviors. Only two participants had consumed pornographic material in their life and reported experience of no sexual arousal from the consumption of pornography. Many participants also reported being able to talk to their friends about sexual activities comfortably:

“I recently got to know that people even fantasize or use their imagination while masturbating (chuckles). I mean, I asked my friend, ‘you know, this practice of masturbating that you all have, I don't’. In college, I was close to this friend of mine. She used to talk a lot about her boyfriend and tell me about all that was going on. And, sometimes she wanted condoms or if the condom broke, then had to get the pills from a nearby pharmacy, which I used to bring to her on my way to meet her.”

These reactions in response to sex by the participants self-identifying as asexual can be understood in light of the three categories proposed by Carrigan (2011) to represent the different attitudes towards sex within the asexual community: (a) sex-positive asexual individuals, who endorse sex as positive and healthy without experiencing sexual desire or seeking to engage in sexual activity themselves; (b) sex-neutral asexual individuals, who are simply uninterested in sex; and (c) sex-averse or anti-sex asexual individuals for whom the

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idea of sex and the idea of engaging in it, is deeply problematic. Carrigan (2011) further hypothesized that for those who are anti-sex, these feelings are a negative response to sex in general, whereas for those who are sex-averse, the negative feelings about sex relate to themselves but not to others.

Saumya expressed an anti-sex attitude resulting in physical distress as well. Max reported a sex-neutral position. For Meher, sex-repulsion was most evident in her use of the words “cringe” and “gross” for anything sexual. Sex-neutrality, for Max, was characterized by lack of distress due to discussions around sex, ability to attend events predominantly sexual nature in nature without participating in them and without experiencing distress, understanding why others wish to engage in sexual behaviors. She also reported sexually compromising for her partners in a relationship for the sake of their pleasure. Kit also exemplified a sex-neutral approach as she displayed a lack of reception and interest in sexual cues but engaged in sexual behaviors for the purpose of reproduction and consummation of marriage with her husband.

“I thought it was there for the honeymoon and to have a baby. You have it. And then after that, I was like, you just like, I love you. I know.”

Common Sources of Information as sites of expression and validation

In the absence of adequate sex education and lack of resources available in the society to gain information about asexuality, the following sources became the spaces for exploration, realization, expression and validation for asexuals.

AVEN and other organizations

AVEN represents the world’s largest online asexual community with a large collection of resources available on its pages that are easily accessible on the web (Scherrer, 2008). Dawson et al. (2018) also found AVEN to be significant in their study. They explain that it is perhaps the resource that AVEN serves as, becoming one of the first and primary sources of information related to asexuality and providing asexuals to interact with each other. For the participants as well, AVEN served to be one of the first sites that provided them with the information they needed regarding asexuality and often the site of validation of their feelings. The wiki page on AVEN served as a comprehensive repository of information they needed while discovering their sexuality. The information posted by other asexuals and their stories helped them understand their identities better:

“The first one was AVEN because there are a lot of stories in there about early life stories especially the one with what is asexual? Because that's where all that was which related to me. They had the same experience. like in our age when we were younger was the same experience. Nobody knew about these and especially women were expected to get married and have children and they were all separated, single moms. They all related to me in that way. So that was my source of, like, real-life connotation. So, I went back and forth, posted my story, and they told us they shared their story with me. So, the more I interacted with them, I found people who knew what I was feeling, what I was going through, that nobody else around me would. So, yeah, that helped me a lot.”

“But more than that, it was the interaction with the other members started helping me understand. And also, there's section for sexuals for explaining about their feelings to asexuals that was very helpful.”

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“Yeah, they have a wiki. They have some definition. So, I read the definition there. But more than that, it was the interaction with the other members that started helping me understand. And also, there's section for asexuals for explaining about their feelings to asexuals that was very helpful.”

In one case, organizations for asexuals were also a major source of social support trespassing the online boundaries and enabling asexual individuals to connect and meet in groups together to support each other:

“Yeah, Internet and then this ‘Indian asexuals’. They have these meetings every month in different cities so I went for this ace meet where we all sat together, discussed that how we are asexual or if we, somebody is thinking they are asexual or not, and discuss how we felt.”

Internet (Search Engines and Online Platforms)

The popularity of the Internet as a common source of information may owe to the privacy that online searches provide. The wide variety of information provided by the Internet with significant confidentiality bears positive impacts as well for people seeking sex education (Döring, 2009). The opportunity to remain anonymous and maintain private conversations may facilitate the formation of groups online that support asexuals, much akin to the online support that helps in the formation of LGBTQ+ identities. Online platforms therefore also serve as safe places of expression of one's identity. The vast amount of information available from around the world at any time can cater to the curiosities and uncertainties that asexuals experience regarding their identity. The opportunity to connect on a global level virtually can especially be helpful in the formation of online communities and support groups for a community estimated to be represented by 1% of the population (Scherrer, 2008).

Academic works/Literature

Academic works may become a powerful source of information about sexuality and sex. Especially in areas characterized by liberal ideas and lack of censorship, books and research papers informing about concerns of the sexual minority may be easily accessed. For Shreyanshi, the bullying incident in her school was the trigger for her to read about religion and atheism that led her to question the connection between atheism and LGBTQ+ community. Supplementing her knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community, her brother's academic discipline became an important source of information for her that ultimately introduced her to the term ‘asexuality’. For Kit, her occupation with academia and pursuit of higher educational degrees characterizes her as an inquisitive literate woman with access to academic material. She sought to learn more about asexuality through published books and research papers as well as online resources. Meher, through her involvement in activism and pursuit of a degree in gender studies, harvested her interest areas to write a book as well as research papers addressing asexuality.

Common Misconceptions

The lack of information available about asexuality, the connotations associated with usage in other fields, the small proportion of people it represents, their marginalization and the lack of awareness among people together contribute some common misconceptions about asexuality that ultimately result in prejudice, discrimination and maltreatment.

Phase

The lack of sexual interest and sexual attraction is often misunderstood by people as a mere phase, especially given the age at which individuals express their asexual identities to their family and friends. Conceptualizing this lack of sexual interest as just a phase can be part of the attempts to maintain the veil of heteronormativity (Sundrud, 2011). These attempts by others can lead asexuals to engage in self-questioning and self-doubt thereby obstructing them to gain their sense of identity (Carrigan, 2011). Although many people have argued that age might be a relevant factor to consider for lack of sexual attraction, no evidence has been found to support this argument (Colborne, 2018).

Lack of (“good”) sexual experience

Very often, people attribute characteristics of asexuality to a lack of sexual experience and even lack of a “good” sexual experience thereby questioning the identity of asexuals. This makes the coming out process especially hard for those with no previous sexual engagement and also leads them to self-doubt and engage in an activity they are not interested in with someone they are not attracted to. For the participants, this misconception was the bases of many instances of sexual abuse, sexual assault, forced attempts at conversion therapy and treatment through rape.

Caused by trauma

The participants responded with certainty to indicate that asexuality was not caused due to any traumatic event but was rather present since birth, and therefore, was determined by nature. They all were of the opinion that their asexuality was not caused by an environmental event or stimuli but was present since birth, expressed in the words “born this way”. However, it was this misconception that hindered the accessibility of psychological resources for most of the Indian participants. In the details of the session with her psychologist, Meher mentions how the psychologist was unaware about asexuality and tried to treat her for some repressed “unconscious” traumatic memory.

Disease/Disorder

Asexuality has often been dismissed as a manifestation of both physical and mental illness. The almost exclusive use of the term ‘asexuality’ within biology to refer to the process of self-reproduction in plants has also contributed to the confinement of the term within medical sciences (Colborne, 2018). The participants emphasized that asexuality was not any disease or disorder. The lack of awareness among the medical and psychological communities often led to misdiagnosis of asexuals and unnecessarily subjecting them to treatment for something they cannot be cured of. This misconception is prevalent in their families as well whose first step is often to take their child to a psychological or medical professional. With reference to the theme of marriage, this misconception is related to the conceptualization of asexuality as a “flaw” in a person thereby impacting their mental health.

“But for a girl it is society is like that it says that the girl is so big, she’s getting old she is not married yet, she is going to not get good support, and something like that, is there a problem she’s not getting married or something like that you know.”

Celibacy

The confusion of asexuality with celibacy is often intertwined with discussions about religion and abstinence as well. The common close feature being absence of sexual engagements, celibacy and asexuality remain vastly different based on the involvement of

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“choice” that an individual has in the former case (Scherrer, 2008). This difference between the two has also been made clear by AVEN on their website: “Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation” (AVEN, 5-23-07).

Socialization and sexual normativity

This master theme provides an overview of the assumption of the sexual imperative nature of society and the idea of sexual normativity that dominates the social institutions. These assumptions around the “universal and obvious” nature of sexual desires impact socialization processes to create mechanisms of discrimination and prejudice by which sexual minorities like asexuals get rejected in society and struggle to find their way in life while navigating through the social institutions designed by societal expectations for sexual normativity.

Lack of Acceptance and Discrimination

Sexual minority groups are often subjected to discrimination and prejudice which is closely linked to their mental health as well (Scherrer, 2008). Asexuals experience discrimination, marginalization and social stigma similar to other non-heteronormative identities (Yule et al., 2013).

Discrimination was a major common theme across all the cases. Emerging from lack of awareness and based on stereotypes, prejudice and stigma, the discriminatory practices were present at homes, workplaces, social circuits, political platforms, social media, and media. As Meher described, these discriminatory practices are an extension of the lack of acceptance in society. Narrating an incident with a friend, she remembers the lack of acceptance among parents as they remain in denial or maintain distance from their own children after learning of their asexuality. Subjected to increased sexual objectification, forced and unwanted sexual advances, harassment at public platforms, Meher expressed her frustration at the unawareness among people. Forced to keep her utensils separately at workplace, the discrimination faced by Meher impacted her career:

“Like sometimes even employers like I was working with people and I told them that I am asexual (so) they started behaving differently, and keeping my plate separate, not touching. So, I quit.”

Similar to Meher’s experience at the workplace, Kit also speaks of lack of awareness among academicians as well who continue to assume homosexuality as the only alternative to heterosexuality. Prejudice against asexuality and lack of awareness caused Kit’s friends to believe her husband’s lies accusing her of adultery. These instances of lack of acceptance and subsequent discrimination further perpetuate the fear of revealing one’s asexual identity with pride. In the case of Saumya and Max, self-blame was the outcome of disapproval from their mothers. Outside the home and workplace, the general lack of awareness among people causes people to not only offend and harass asexuals but also actively discriminate against them. Max highlighted the unwillingness of people to educate themselves about asexuality as they continued to equate her asexuality with the concept of asexual reproduction in plants:

“I was supporting a friend who wanted me to attend and they said, “oh, isn’t she the girl that sleeps with plants or something to do with plants or reproduces as a plant and stuff of that nature?”

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Uninvited from social events and called out for attending social get-togethers, Max's social system had been severely impacted as many of her friends left her and her mother disapproved of her asexual identity. Emily faced the same struggles as Kit as people continued to call her lesbian based on the faulty assumption that homosexuality is the alternative to heterosexuality.

Difficulty finding partners

Very few (0% to 33%) asexual individuals are engaged in a relationship (Bogaert, 2004; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Prause and Graham, 2007). Interestingly, despite the common methodology and sex of the participants, unlike the findings of Van Houdenhove et al. (2015), all the women in our study, including aromantic asexuals, reported a desire for a relationship. For all of them, understanding and acceptance by the partner was of most importance in a partnered relationship. However, the specifics of the relationship varied for each participant in terms of intimacy, labels and friendship. In congruence with the findings of Scherrer (2008) aromantic asexuals characterized their ideal relationships as related to close friendships. The difficulties described by the participants in our study were supported by the report by Haefner (2011). While all the participants admitted to being honest about their asexuality at the start of the relationship, it was the consequent events in the relationship that resulted in difficulties and subsequent development of unhealthy coping styles.

Max described "forcing" herself to engage in sexual behaviors for the sake of her partner's pleasure and the subsequent psychological impacts on her self-esteem and sense of self-worth. In the case of Saumya, the breakup with her boyfriend was the trigger for her suicidality and feelings of alienation. She constantly worried about not being able to find a "life partner" who would love and accept her. The desire for love, care, affection and support was common for all. Kit and Emily, who identified themselves as aromantic asexuals, wanted a "friend" in a committed relationship. Some participants also showed the willingness to compromise and engage in sex, albeit less frequently. However, all the participants expressed concern regarding how difficult it is to find an asexual partner or a partner with low sexual drive who would accept and understand their identity while treating them with care and support.

"So, the perfect relationship for me at that time and even today is a person who accepts you the way you are and you need not change for him or his family. A person who loves cares supports and enjoying your life rather than thinking about society kids and other things. It's all about love like hugs kisses, understanding though deepest emotion that is going inside your partner. And support. So that is a perfect relationship."

"A relationship where you know everything is very healthy...so everything is healthy, people are supportive of each other and they appreciate each other, they are there for them."

"I can see myself getting married with the right person who understands I'm asexual and doesn't try to force me to engaging in a sexual relationship..."

Marriage

Marriage was a common theme for all the participants. While the participants in their young adulthood referred to their uncertainty about getting married and their parents' aspirations for them to be married, the participants in their adulthood were more concerned with the theme of marriage as societal and familial pressure grew and impacted their mental health.

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For Meher, this societal pressure strongly influenced her parents who wished for her to be married and settled. Her ideologies and stance supporting feminism and LGBTQ+ concerns are often targeted as reasons interfering with the prospect of her getting married. She envisions herself in a healthy “non-toxic” relationship without the compulsion of a marriage. For Saumya, the theme of marriage was central to her distress as her personal aspirations since childhood to find love and get married became compounded with pressure from her family and peer pressure. The breakup with her boyfriend whom she loved and wanted to marry further exacerbated her concerns. She expressed losing hope of ever getting married as she engaged in self-doubt and self-blame:

“It’s so negative sometimes I have suicidal thoughts, I have cursed myself for being asexual. I cry why am I asexual. I asked God what have I done wrong, that you made me asexual. It really does.”

The societal pressure was most apparent in the cases of Indian (Meher and Saumya) and Ethiopian culture (Kit). Narrating experiences from her past, Kit mentions the societal expectations of marriage during her young adulthood. She was the only participant in the study who had been married. The issues of marriage and divorce also bring into highlight the discrimination practiced by law as marriage entitles the spouse to seek divorce on the bases of absence of sexual engagement. Her marriage and subsequent divorce added to the understanding of problems faced by asexuals in law-bound partnered relationships as well as the consequent socio-economic impacts on the single parent:

“It does affect especially in society or the... Because I also have a kid. You know, I’m a single mom and then he’s not given me any money because he’s angry with me. He’s sure I was cheating. At some point, he would like to see my dad.”

For Max, her mother’s aspirations for her to get married to a man have led to disapproval of her biromantic asexual identity causing severance in Max’s social support system while adding further stress to her concerns regarding partnered relationships. Central to the theme of marriage are cultural influence, age, gender, societal, familial and peer pressure, desire for romantic partnered relationships and impact on mental health.

Lack of representation in the media

As studied by Marks (2017), the representation of asexuals in media and popular culture is limited to portraying them as “sick, dead or lying”. Marks goes as far as to quote Gerbner and Signorelli (1979) in calling this lack of representation of asexuality in popular culture as asexuality’s “symbolic annihilation”. Authentic and explicit portrayal of asexuality is necessary for legitimization of asexual identities in our society powerfully influenced by media. Only very few mainstream media content are examples of representation of asexuality in media. As mentioned by the participants as well, ‘The Big Bang Theory’ and ‘BoJack Horseman’ are two popular American television series which also helped them in the processes of realization, self-identification and self-validation.

“But at that time, I was starting to watch ‘The Big Bang Theory’. I know I was reading there was something about its fans. Oh shit, then a thing. Sheldon was asexual! there was finally one asexual character! Because I thought it was like so unrealistic over this, so obsessed with sex and everything.”

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Whereas, in cases of misrepresentation, very often, the characters shown to be not interested in sex are also the ones which are associated with less human like traits such as an impaired ability to express or understand emotions. Or the characters most associated with a lack of sexual interest are robots, aliens, or some other inhuman creatures (Marks, 2017). Indeed, asexuals form the LGBTQ+ minority that still remains one of the most under- or misrepresented in media (White, 2020). The participants express a sense of disappointment and hopelessness from the media regarding appropriate representation of asexuality that may serve to not help asexuals gain sense of self-identification, self-worth and self-validation, but can also be the tool for the dissemination of information, spreading awareness and validating asexual identities among masses thereby facilitating the integration and acceptance of asexual identities in society at large. The bonds formed between the audience and the characters in media can potentially aid in attitude adjustment as well (White, 2020). The participants too were well aware of this lack of representation as they suffer from its impacts:

“I think if you take ‘Riverdale’ as an example is because that show is super sexual everyone is having sex and Jughead wouldn't fit in to their neat little box of teenagers if he was asexual and aromantic um so I think it's mostly because of that and also because if someone's asexual they can't have sex with anyone and what's the fun in having a character that can't have sex basically.”

“And in international media I think, it wasn't much inclusion you know like why do they show us very, as I don't know, villains and cruel and we're cruel or I don't know as somebody who's lonely and will die alone, nobody is going to cry over it...”

Identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum

Despite identifying with non-heteronormative romantic orientations, most of the participants indicated a lack of sense of belongingness with the LGBTQ+ community. Some attributed this disconnect to the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the media and at pride marches and its inherent nature to promote the idea of “compulsory sexuality”. However, the struggles faced by asexuals as a result of discrimination created a sense of belongingness for two participants. As theorized by Rust (1992), identifying as an LGBTQ+ identity associates an individual with the social experience of that identity, which for sexual minorities is often characterized by discrimination. For both LGBTQ and asexual people, one of the locations of discrimination is its historical and contemporary connection to institutions of mental and physical health. At the same time, the participants also perceive asexuals as the more marginalized section within the queer community which may counter their sense of belonging with the community. The relations with the LGBTQ+ community differed for the participants. While one believed to stay away from the discourse and not mobilize in action, another two found their identity through active mobilization as an ally to the community initially, and another perceived asexuals as distinct from the LGBTQ+ community associating negative connotations with the group:

“It's like a caste system in sexuality. So, because I'm against caste system, so, I'm against these labels. I don't like such terms.”

“As a stand right now, no I don't feel a part of it because of the way media negatively represents it and everything and talks it, portrays it rather, so I don't really feel a part of it. I feel like there's not enough speak forum for people who are asexual like me. There is stuff with the homosexuals like the gays or lesbians and people who are transgender or people

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who are genderqueer or non-binary but not really enough for being on the limelight for asexuals.”

Dawson et al. (2018) also reported complex relationships between the LGBTQ+ community and the asexual community as some felt unwelcomed in the community. Raymond (Marks) called queer community a “category in flux” and argued that despite the lack of consensus over terms, it should be fluid, politically radical, and reject binary categories (for example, heterosexual-homosexual). Despite an active participation in the LGBTQ+ movement, for Meher, LGBTQ+ community was also a hostile and unwelcoming group sometimes as she describes the presence of a-phobia among many members of the LGBTQ+ community:

“But this is true that us asexual people, we remain separate from the community because there is a lot of discrimination and sometimes people say that we are just straight or we are pretending which becomes a problem as there is a lot of acephobia within the community.”

Psychological Impacts

The lack of acceptance by family, friends, colleagues and society at large can pose an absence of protective factors in the lives of asexuals. Constantly faced with lack of acceptance and discrimination by the predominantly sexual normative society can have psychological impacts on asexuals leading to mental health problems.

Self-doubt

Supported by the findings of the study conducted by Van Houdenhove et al. (2015), all the participants reported feeling different since childhood. However, they report excusing themselves by thinking it was just a phase or that they were too young. Emily, who self-identified as aromantic asexual, reported thinking of boys as “gross” in her childhood. Meher reported engaging in sex twice as a way for her to ensure that she is asexual. This could also have been due to the harassment and offenses targeted at her for being asexual. Saumya remembered taking her time as she questioned herself before accepting her lack of sexual interest as natural:

“It was confirmed before that only but I was just I was taking time that may be someone I like or I'm just scared of it, maybe I'm just scared of first intercourse, I'm scared of showing my body maybe I'm scared to take it inside maybe I'm scared of that pain maybe I'm not ready maybe I'm scared of getting pregnant all these questions used to come in my mind and so I used to think that I cannot do it maybe my mind is not prepared.”

These accounts are illustrative of the many doubts circling the heads of asexuals as they struggle to realize and come to terms with their asexual identity. The impact of the common misconceptions about sex and the common offenses targeted at asexuals by others are apparent in the process of self-doubting that asexuals experience before realizing and accepting their asexual identity.

Loneliness and Depression

Asexuals have been reported to be more likely to experience melancholy, sadness, loneliness and a sort of separation (Jay, 2007). It has been suggested that since asexuals are less likely to be in partnered relationships (Bogaert, 2004; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Brotto et al., 2010), despite expressing the wish to be in one, they are more likely to feel lonely (Yule et al., 2013). It has been hypothesized that if asexuals experience similar pressures as other sexual minority communities, they may also be more likely to experience depression than

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heterosexuals. They also hypothesized that lack of sexual attraction towards others may deprive asexuals of social connections and lead to increased symptoms of depression (Yule et al., 2013). Nurius (1983) found elevated levels of depression among asexuals. Distress arising from the pressure due to social expectations, relationships, initial concerns about the reasons for lack of sexual attraction or interest may contribute to the experience of depression (Yule et al., 2013).

On seeking professional psychological help, a common theme across the Indian participants was the lack of inclusive and queer affirmative professional psychological help available. The participants reported unawareness among psychologists and psychiatrists regarding the asexuality spectrum and its distinction from any disease or disorder. Overall, the participants reported feeling lonely. This could be due to the lack of acceptance by parents, family, friends and society in general and also due to the difficulty in finding a partner. For many, in the absence of social support systems, the feeling of loneliness becomes aggravated as they find no one to talk to who would understand and accept them. Marginalization also emerges as an inherent consequence of lack of sexual interest in a society characterized as 'sexusociety' (Vance, 2018). Perhaps this marginalization is one way that contributes to the feeling of loneliness among asexuals as their relationships get severed and their social lives become impacted. This pattern can be seen across cultures:

“It does make me depressed, it does make me unhappy, it does make me angry, it’s not easy to be discriminated against, it’s not nice, you know, I’m still like an outcast, all because of me being asexual, like it doesn’t have to be this way but people are ignorant and stuff so, I do feel the feelings that one would feel towards being discriminated against.”

“So, it is very difficult and yes I am struggling in that very badly and it’s very lonely absolutely very lonely.”

Sense of Insecurity and Lowered Self-Esteem

Discrimination can negatively impact self-esteem (Verkuyten, 2010; Harris-Britt, 2007). This theme presented itself in different forms of the participants in the study, For Max, the struggle of finding a partner, loss of friendships, disapproval from her mother and the discrimination faced by her in the hypersexualized society she resides in, combined to impact her self-esteem. Her sense of insecurity is apparent in the hesitancy in her voice, quest to find a friend, and compromises made by her to sustain the existing relationships at the expense of her self-esteem. It is especially in the aftermath of the sexual compromises made by her for the sake of her partner’s pleasure that she feels disrespected and degraded. The lack of awareness in society apparent in the offensive statements made in response to her asexual identity cause harm to her self-worth.

“It’s just a passive insult and its feeling degraded, like you know, just because I choose like or I feel like I... you know I just don’t belong like, I...they make me feel like, oh you know... you’re supposed to have sex, what’s wrong with you, you know and something like that, you know, that’s basically you know constant berating and stuff.”

For Kit, the dissolution of her marriage due to her asexuality, the domestic abuse suffered by her, the false allegation of adultery, loss of friendships, lack of acceptance at home and workplace and her life as a single mother have led her to develop a sense of insecurity both psychologically as well as in matters of socio-economic concerns. Her progression into middle age as a single mother had further created uncertainty, spurred a desire for a partner

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along with apprehensions regarding finding one. The difficulties involved in finding a suitable partner and delay in marriage had impacted Saumya's self-esteem. For Emily, this sense of insecurity was evident in her apprehensions regarding her future partner leaving her. For Meher, despite her activism and active advocacy for the concerns of asexuals and women, the constant harassment involving sexually objectifying comments as well as sexual assaults impact her mental health.

Table No. 2 Table showing the master themes, superordinate themes, and verbatim across the cases

Asexuality as a spectrum	
Lack of sexual interest and sexual attraction	<p>Emily: <i>"I don't experience any sexual attraction to other people. I don't look at a person and feel the need to have sex or kiss or whatever."</i></p> <p>Kit: <i>"So I was never oriented towards other people in a sexual way. So, it was a part of me."</i></p> <p>Max: <i>"My personal take on the term asexuality is someone who is just not into sex, who would rather not have sex...I think the definition is a person who is just not into sex. Just point blank and period. And for me, asexuality to me is just I'm not really into sex, you know like I'm... I'm um attracted to men and women but I prefer not to have sex in any type of relationship that we engage in, like me and another person in general."</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"It's just not having sexual attraction towards anyone. i don't feel sexual attraction towards anyone."</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>"Personally like I get affection for another person but not sexual attraction at all. The thought of sexual attraction does not come in my mind at all when I think about someone special or anything so that is the thing like lack of sexual attraction in other people is asexuality for me."</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"Asexuality means that a person does not like to have sex or is a sex repulse. They have a lot of romantic feelings. Everything is completely normal except the fact that the person does not want penetration. It is only that we do not feel like doing sex we only need that attention from girls or guys we only need life partner."</i></p>
Distinction between sexuality and romance	<p>Emily: <i>"Um, let's see I'm both asexual and aromantic and they're very intermixed."</i> <i>"Um a lot of people confuse asexuality with aromanticism which is pretty annoying and aromanticism has even less representation than asexuality... It's like twins there, they're very alike in many many ways but they are two different people you know."</i></p> <p>Kit: <i>"Aromanticism? That's... that's like my current definition, because my understanding goes for a match, you want to be touchy with someone and I'm not."</i> <i>"He couldn't differentiate between sex and love. Just like I thought love was an emotional connection. I didn't know it was anything more."</i></p> <p>Max: <i>"I get flamboyant in a sense like everybody knows I'm not into sex and like if I engage in relationship with people, whether romantic or otherwise, I let them know upfront, I'm not into sex or I'm not going to have sex with you and the like."</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"...because I am searching about different researches during my research so when we talk about asexual erasure, it happens a lot. It's as if saying I am panromantic so people will start addressing me as pan so I avoid calling myself panromantic, I call myself asexual."</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>"I told him like I'm asexual like Demi sexual actually so I told him like I will not kiss him or anything at least one year into the relationship."</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"So, I commend to hetero-romantic category I need a partner where I am totally attracted to guys only, where I fantasise our family and I pray for it."</i> <i>"Asexuality means that a person does not like to have sex or is a sex repulse. They have a lot of romantic feelings. Everything is completely normal except the fact that the person does not want penetration."</i></p>
Attitude towards sex	<p>Emily: <i>"I'm fine with other people like being attracted to people and having sex or whatever as long as I don't have to perform or participate in it, I'm fine you do whatever you want to do."</i></p> <p>Kit: <i>"I thought it was there for the honeymoon and to have a baby."</i> <i>"I can't imagine what they're feeling during that process. So, it's always a mystery."</i></p> <p>Max: <i>"It just a personal for me anyway I just didn't like the idea of sex or anything"</i></p>

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	<p>sexual... I just never been into sex or anything sexual, not even kissing or anything.” “I’m not comfortable with it.”</p> <p>Meher: “Sex sells like sex is being shown as a product everywhere so it makes some uncomfortable and then sex is seen as something you know, you have to do it so there is underlying pressure all the time to do it sometimes I feel like I am not women enough because i am not doing that.”</p> <p>Shreyanshi: “I’m not someone who just accepts sex because he wants to do it actually...I’ll actually want to have it if I care about him that much. Compromise, you can say it.” “There are asexuals who are repulsed even to the idea of sex and watching pornography and all but I’m not like that. I don’t feel anything when I’m watching them or think about them, so, I don’t have any trauma or any repulsion about that.”</p> <p>Saumya: “It is a mental emotional physical torture for me, I start vomiting. That much, I am that much sex repulse.”</p>
Common Sources of Information as sites of expression and validation	
AVEN and other organizations	<p>Max: “Knowledge through Aven. It’s this website uh A-V-E-N. They talk about asexuality and what it means and different terms that people are on the spectrum and that is how I learned, I said wow I don’t know.”</p> <p>Meher: “They have these meetings every month in different cities so I went for this ace meet where we all sat together, discussed that how we are asexual or if we, somebody is thinking they are asexual or not, and discuss how we felt and.”</p> <p>Kit: “But I found that local group, from AVEN. And then we had to meet up once. I felt much better after that. Yeah, that felt much better cause I was like, okay, there are physically people who are like me. After I met them, I felt okay.”</p>
Internet (Search Engines and Online Platforms)	<p>Max: “Um I just um googled um why am I not sexually. I just looked up what I was feeling on Google like I googled how I felt like why am I not attracted to my partner sexually and stuff of that nature.”</p>
Academic works/Literature	<p>Sheyanshi: “My brother is doing psychology honours and he always gives me a lot of knowledge about other things and all. So, I already knew everything.”</p> <p>Kit: “I did a research. I read and read and read until, I was sure. I did that for four months to be sure. There’s nothing else that can describe me.”</p>
Common Misconceptions	
Phase	<p>Emily: “I was like oh no I’m asexual um and then there are like oh well you sure that it is not a phase, that you are not just a late bloomer?”</p> <p>Kit: “The common friend from my ex also says, oh, you should wait. So, he’s like, yeah, some women are still planting seeds for a while and you might want to start popping again. No, I know I won’t. I don’t want to ever go back to that again. But he is like oh no that’s past, it’s a phase.”</p> <p>Max: “Like I said, just the negative stereotypes, you know that have to do with being an asexual like something I mentioned like it’s just a phase...That’s you know top I under these stuff that I hate.”</p> <p>Meher: “A lot of times people say it’s a phase, itna toh (this much) I am so used to it now. It’s like I know it’s not a phase or something. I know 50-year-old asexuals. They are 50-year-old.”</p> <p>Shreyanshi: “So many times, like I was in high school I guess like I don’t use like my whole friends have boyfriends and all, so they were like they prude is a normal word which they used to call me. They always told me that when you will be in college you will find a guy and you will be naked and all the things. So, yeah, they always told me that it’s a phase but now I think it is too long to consider it as a phase.”</p>
Lack of (“good”) sexual experience	<p>Emily: “I know where it stands with a lot of things even though I haven’t done a lot of things uh simply from imagining like would I want to do this with this person? No, no, I wouldn’t.”</p> <p>Kit: “Of course, she’s waiting for the right guy to be there? Yeah, sure. And then that’s common.”</p> <p>Meher: “Akele mein mile and they are trying to do things ki ‘aao, yun karte hain, you’ll feel better. You might like it.’ And, it’s gross. (We meet alone and they are trying to do things like ‘Come, let’s do this, you’ll feel better. You might like it. And, it’s gross.)”</p> <p>Shreyanshi: “This recently happened, so basically i have this pansexual friend, when I told him I am asexual he said just do it once and then you will see like how I’m really</p>

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	<p>good at it because he is pansexual so he has had sex with guys and all so he basically invited me to his apartment that if u will do it with me then you will like it from here on.”</p> <p>Saumya: “Yeah, my mother. How can you call yourself asexual when you are virgin? Maybe if you do it you will love it, you're just scared of the pain. That's a very, very common thing.”</p>
Caused by trauma	<p>Kit: “Yeah. So, at some point I had all those things. Yes. They're all there.”</p> <p>Max: “I mean I did go through a traumatic experience in my childhood... but it had nothing about ... I just never been into like ... you know like sexuality or anything to do with sex.”</p> <p>Meher: “Chahe unke saath abuse hua ho, chahe na hua ho. Pehle mujhe bhi lagta tha ki main bhi sexual abuse ki wajah se hu traumatised but nahi. Bohto se cases mein koi abuse nahi hua hai. and they are just asexuals. (Whether they were abused or not. At first, even I used to think that I am traumatised due to sexual abuse. There are many cases in which no abuse has happened and they are just asexuals.)”</p> <p>Shreyanshi: “I understand what you are trying to say if I'm basically traumatized and that is related to my asexuality, right? No, I'm actually not traumatized.” “Asexuality is divided in 3 basically and repulsive is one of them, so i think it can affect. Trauma can affect someone to turn into asexual because it is included in that.”</p> <p>Saumya: “No, that's what I said, even if I sexually abused, I'm not asexual because of that. No trauma can make you feel asexual. It's pure feeling of not having it. And it's not in your mind also.”</p>
Disease/Disorder	<p>Emily: But apparently asexuality is still listed as a mental disease and you can basically go through conversion therapy if you are asexual and you live with the wrong family um yeah.</p> <p>Kit: “And if they knew I didn't have any sexual life, they would have thought I was weird. Strange. They thought I was having some psychological problems. It was very difficult.”</p> <p>Max: “It's not like it's a physical disease. So, I don't mean to come up as offensive or something. It's not like you have a broken arm or if you have a psychological disorder or something like that... it's just being asexual like.”</p> <p>Meher: “Yeah, mostly kya hota hai ki hum log therapy bhi isliye nahi le paate kyunki jo mental health professionals hain, dekho depression ka symptom ye bhi hota hai ki aapko sexually repulse-ness feel hogi, like aapka man nahi karega karne ka, toh woh usko equate karke shuru ho jaate hain. (Mostly what happens is that we are not even able to take therapy because these mental health professionals tell us that ‘see, this can be a symptom of depression or you feel sexually repulsed or you just don't feel in the mood for it’. So, they just start equating asexuality with all this.)”</p> <p>Saumya: “My parents think that I am scared. They have taken me to a psychologist, they have taken me to a psychiatrist, they have taken me to a gynaecologist and finally the gynaecologist suggested them to a sexologist.”</p>
Celibacy	<p>Emily: Celibacy is totally different and I...I know that it has nothing to do with religion because I am not that religious um and I know there's a big thing in Christianity as well that you're not supposed to have sex before marriage or something but I don't think it's because of religion. It's like when you're gay, it's not because you are Hindu or Jew or anything, it's just because you are gay.</p> <p>Max: “I do not believe it has anything to do with celibacy or has anything to do with religion.”</p> <p>Meher: “Han, unko lagta hai main brahmakumari ban jaungi. Ya fir ye celibate hain hum log. Celibacy se equate kar dete hain. But this is not celibacy. (Yes, they think I'll remain a celibate. Or, that all asexual people are practicing celibacy. They equate it with celibacy. But this is not celibacy.)”</p> <p>Saumya: “Ha (Yes), yeah, they say that thing, ‘then become a nun na (no?)’. Simple. ‘Why are you're wearing such short clothes, why are you roaming with boys’. It is as equal as becoming the nun.”</p>
Socialisation and sexual normativity	
Lack of acceptance and discrimination	<p>Kit: “The law discriminated against me because it's my nature.”</p> <p>Max: “I feel they treat me differently... when they get to know I'm asexual...My coming out was not easy. My mom didn't understand it um she had a hard time dealing</p>

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	<p><i>with it 'cause uh she wants grandchildren and stuff like that and I don't want to have children so um it was really hard. She wanted me to find a husband like I'm almost 29 and she wants me to have grandchildren and find a husband and stuff of that nature."</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"There is a feudal structure within the (LGBTQIA+) community which is undeniable. Toh woh thoda sa discrimination raha toh woh thoda homophobic raha toh I resigned after a year February mein and bohot saara hota hai discrimination. Log aise dekhte hain jaise tum alien ho. (So, there was discrimination and it was homophobic and so, I resigned after a year in February, and there was a lot of discrimination. People used to look at us as if we were aliens.)"</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"But for a girl it is society is like that it says that the girl is so big, she's getting old she is not married yet, she is going to not get good support, and something like that, is there a problem she's not getting married or something like that you know."</i></p>
Difficulty finding partners	<p>Kit: <i>"So it might be difficult to find someone exactly like myself who wants exactly the same things that I want."</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"But I'm very picky when it comes to choosing a partner."</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>"So it is hard to find companionship right now and so I never had any relationship basically even though guys confess me but I basically open it all that you know I will not be sexual and they just back off so that's like the main problem you can say. It's hard to find people who are that understanding and will get into relationship with an asexual person."</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"I'm emotionally low of not having a partner. Not having a friend who is there with me, with whom I can travel."</i></p>
Marriage	<p>Kit: <i>"Yeah, so, there are norms for your marriage. You have to have sex. That's even more a law than a norm. That disturbs me."</i></p> <p>Max: <i>"I can see myself getting married with the right person who understands I'm asexual and doesn't try to force me to engaging in a sexual relationship."</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"There's pressure ki han (that yes) what will happen if you get married to a heterosexual man or a homosexual woman, what if they are hypersexual so why would I date someone who is hypersexual in the first place. Because who wants things to get ugly, it will lead to ugly."</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"... the most beautiful marriage. But it doesn't seem coming true right now, the thought of marriage has been the most dominant thought in three years of my life."</i></p>
Lack of representation in media	<p>Emily: <i>"I think it's not negativity, it's just the lack of information. I wish that there was more talk about asexuality even if that is negative because even if it's negative more people get to know about it and that way you can know that you're asexual even if it's this negative thing um so it's just the lack of representation right now."</i></p> <p>Kit: <i>"But it's not even in the scene, you might say. They are all low-budget movies because I know There are books, but not movies."</i></p> <p>Max: <i>"My opinion is that yeah... the media is hypersexualized... I'm not comfortable with it ... I don't like it but that's just what society wants and media wants you know... everything, sex sells as they say"</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>"I don't think so in the main media, especially because they just came to introduce the name of sexuality like lesbian and gay and as for asexuality, there are YouTube channels and they have asexual people I guess."</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>"I don't think so in the main media, especially because they just came to introduce the name of sexuality like lesbian and gay and as for asexuality, there are YouTube channels and they have asexual people I guess."</i></p>
Identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum	<p>Max: <i>"As a stand right now, no I don't feel a part of it because of the way media negatively represents it and everything and talks it, portrays it rather, so I don't really feel a part of it. I feel like there's not enough speak for um for people who are asexual like me. There is stuff with the homosexuals like the gays or lesbians and people who are transgender or people who are genderqueer or non-binary but not really enough for being on the limelight for asexuals. That's what I feel"</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>"LGBT is basically considered like which gender you are attracted to and they don't consider how much and what extent you are attracted to. The extent is always missing in the talks of the community."</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>"I won't consider it as a part of the plus see basically asexuality and LGBT"</i></p>

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	<i>are very different things.”</i>
Psychological Impacts	
Self-doubt	<p>Kit: <i>“He was accusing me of lying for not having any crushes. And that really psychologically somehow affected me, but I was very broken after that.”</i></p> <p>Max: <i>“It’s just a passive insult and it’s feeling degraded, like you know, just because I choose like or I feel like I... you know I just don’t belong.”</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>“...making you feel like you’re not good enough. You’re not human enough.”</i></p> <p>Shreyanshi: <i>“Like what will happen when I don’t allow him to have that frequent sex... Like he will get tired of me. It does affect my thinking emotionally.”</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>“It was confirmed before that only but I was just I was taking time that may be someone I like or I’m just scared of it, maybe I’m just scared of first intercourse, I’m scared of showing my body maybe I’m scared to take it inside maybe I’m scared of that pain maybe I’m not ready maybe I’m scared of getting pregnant all these questions used to come in my mind and so I used to think that I cannot do it maybe my mind is not prepared.”</i></p>
Loneliness and Depression	<p>Emily: <i>“I might not think about a lot but it’s something that I’m always aware of, that I am not like everyone else.”</i></p> <p>Kit: <i>“There should be more awareness, more studies. There’s not enough. So, I think especially in that kind of psychology, ‘cause they think that depression will go up to the point they think of suicide at some point. Because, yeah, it’s difficult. I mean, I still have the emotional conviction at some point, to imagine all those depressing points...”</i></p> <p>Meher: <i>“There were times when I was very depressed of the things, like why am I asexual? Life mein mess kam hota hai if I was just sexual. (Life would have been less messy if I was just sexual.)”</i></p> <p>Saumya: <i>“It is depressing. It is really like I can’t explain what suffering am I going through.”</i></p>

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of self-identified asexuals. Through qualitative interview method and interpretative phenomenological analysis, nuances in the experiences unique to the individuals were studied and interpreted by situating them within their context. Cross case analysis revealed the commonalities across the cases. Despite the many nuances and differences between the participants and their contexts and demographic details, their experiences of asexuality were marked by conceptualization of asexuality as a spectrum along with the thorough understanding of the label best suited to oneself and the distinction between sex and romance. Some common and popular sources of information emerged in the absence of adequate sex education and resources in the sexual normative society, further contributing to the studies identifying AVEN as an important forum for interaction and information about asexuality. Interestingly, despite the differences in cultural and developmental variables, some common misconceptions prevail around the globe stigmatizing asexual identities and resulting in discrimination. Lack of acceptance by family, friends, partners and society at large signifies the absence of some protective factors in the life of asexuals. The concerns of finding an accepting partner and marrying in a society dominated by assumptions of sexual normativity further deteriorate the mental health of asexuals. This phenomenon of sexual normativity and feeling of alienation is exemplified in the lack of representation of asexuality in media and a debated inclusion in LGBTQ+ communities. Collectively, these factors contribute to elevated levels of depression, self-doubt, loneliness and insecurity.

Implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study of asexuality can help inform further scientific studies with inclusive information of demography. Attempts at seeking to explore and understand this newly added aspect on the spectrum will broaden the understanding of sexuality and gain insights into the individual variations in the experience, perceptions, behaviors, performances of romance

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and sexuality as well. The contemporary trends in counselling involve inclusive practices making accreditation and licensure for working with queer communities a requirement both inclusive and progressive in nature. This qualification necessitates efforts dedicated towards building a comprehensive understanding of the spectrum of sexuality. As is apparent from the results of the study, many psychological and medical professionals still lack awareness regarding asexuality and therefore, there is a need for training and spreading awareness. More psychologists with queer affirmative accreditation are needed in the field of mental health. The results of the study can be an alarming opportunity for the media houses to make their productions and content more inclusive and representative. Organizations, groups and associations representing the concerns of LGBTQIA+ community can learn and develop new strategies to make asexuals feel included and welcomed. Employees working in human resources can use the results as a guide to make workplaces more inclusive through effective implementation of anti-discrimination policies against asexuals. The results can be used by law and policy makers to gain insight into the accommodation of all identities and amend the existing discriminatory laws accordingly. The present study can also contribute to the limited academic information available about asexuality.

The small sample size of the present study limits its potential for generalizability. Although data was collected from diverse cultures, the data was limited in its representation of other genders except women. More participants can be included to expand the present study. Quantitative studies can be conducted to complement the data collected and enhance generalizability. The present study may have suffered from issues related to language barriers as the researchers were only fluent in Hindi and English. There is scope for this study to be expanded to include interpretations of lived experiences of asexuals belonging to different age groups, gender, sex, and language backgrounds.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no known conflicts of interest.

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