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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Asexual identity development and internalisation: a scoping review of quantitative and qualitative evidence

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### ABSTRACT

Individuals who do not experience sexual attraction and adopt an asexual identity are the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research. A scoping review was conducted to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. Findings from 29 articles were analysed and formed into themes that best describe the key events and sense-making processes underlying identity development, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their identity. These findings indicate that heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality play a role in how individuals internalise their asexuality, which in turn, shapes their identity development. Despite this, considerable gaps in the literature concerning partner relationships, stigmatisation, isolation and the impact that this has on asexuals' wellbeing continue to exist. Thus, future research should examine the challenges faced by asexuals such as identity development within a heteronormative and allonormative context and the resources available to ameliorate them.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

asexuality; identity; sexuality; internalisation; challenges

### Personal identification and philosophical orientation

The authors acknowledge and accept that asexuality is valid and real. This research was conducted with the aim to identify current knowledge of asexuality and components of asexual identity development and internalisation that emerge within literature. In doing this, we seek to accurately and sensitively relay information surrounding asexuality and enrich our understanding of sexuality and the philosophy behind sex and sexual attraction. We believe that this research contributes towards a growing awareness and understanding of asexuality and may help to reverse myths and negative assumptions surrounding asexuality.

We believe that asexual experiences are diverse and accept the common definition of asexuality as a lack or absence of sexual attraction. We acknowledge that asexuality is not a behaviour, a form of celibacy or sexual desire disorder. We are also aware that many asexual people have romantic relationships and may engage in sexual activity. We recognise that the dismissal or stigmatisation of asexuality within everyday life may contribute towards psychological distress among asexual people and effect their identity development. We believe that our understanding of sex and sexuality can be enriched by studying asexuality.

Asexuality as a sexual identity has increased in profile partly due to the emergence of social media outlets, the development of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and a growth in academic attention, beginning with Bogaert's (2004) demographic analysis in which a 1% prevalence rate of asexuality was recorded within a British sample ( $N > 18,000$ ). According

to Cuthbert (2019), asexuality is becomingly increasingly recognised within non-heterosexual communities, mainstream media and popular culture. Because of this, asexuality has since been the focus of increasing amounts of psychological and sociological research (Mollet & Lackman, 2018).

## Definitional issues

According to Laumann et al. (2000), researchers' interest in sexuality can be categorised under three separate headings – namely, behaviour, desire and identity. This can include the use of a description-based approach to identifying a sexual orientation (i.e. sexual attraction/desire towards individuals of the opposite or same sex), a behavioural approach (i.e. a lack of sexual behaviour), as well as self-identification. Beginning with Storms' (1980) two-dimensional model of sexual orientation, academic literature has most frequently defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction or low sexual desire (Bogaert, 2006; Brotto & Yule, 2017; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011). Although this definition is widely used within literature (Prause & Graham, 2007), it is important to recognise that asexual individuals have the potential for sexual arousal, can engage in sexual behaviours and be romantically attracted to others (Bogaert, 2006). For example, some individuals may identify as asexual but still experience sexual attraction or engage in sexual behaviour, while others may define their asexuality through abstinence from sexual intercourse (Poston & Baumle, 2010). This in turn, indicates that asexuality may exist along a spectrum, with many asexual individuals experiencing varying levels of sexual attraction and varying attitudes towards sexual activity (Hammack et al., 2019). Moreover, when defining asexuality within research, there is increasing interest in the role of sexual and romantic dimensions among participants (Scherrer, 2008). Therefore, all criteria used to identify asexuality within research will be accepted as relevant for the purpose of this review. This will better map the use of a focused definition within research.

## The scope of current research

Research into the area of asexuality has evolved following Bogaert's (2004) initial study, with an increasing focus on the experience of being asexual and associated psychological characteristics. Prause and Graham (2007) initiated such investigation, through the comparison of both sexual and self-identified asexual individuals and the features that distinguished both groups. Through this investigation, Prause and Graham (2007) characterised asexuality as a lack of sexual desire directed towards others, with many participants reporting few to no sexual experiences. Their findings prompted the development of further investigation that focused on the lived experiences of asexual participants, and how this may allow us to better understand and define asexuality. In light of this, research has focused largely on characteristics associated with asexuality, with some indicating similarities between asexuality and other sexual minority identities (Scherrer, 2008). Specifically, such investigations have focused on aspects of asexuality such as commonalities within the community (Carrigan, 2011), coming-out processes (Robbins et al., 2016) and experiences of stigmatisation and polarisation (Chasin, 2015). Through this, research has shown a higher prevalence of interpersonal problems and mental health difficulties associated with asexual individuals (Yule et al., 2013), with many attributing this to the effects of discrimination and negative coming-out experiences (Lucassen et al., 2011). For example, MacInnis and Hodson (2012, p. 738), reported anti-asexual bias held towards asexuals that was 'equivalent to, or even more extreme, than bias held towards homosexuals and bisexuals'. These negative sentiments held towards asexuality and a lack of acceptance from family, friends and professional misunderstandings (Chasin, 2015), appear to influence asexuals' self-concepts and the development of their asexual identities (McInroy et al., 2020). Thus, the process of integrating or internalising these sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming increasingly studied among asexual individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Scherrer, 2008).

## Identity development

According to Keniston (1968) and Marcia (1987), identity is a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's goals, beliefs, values and life roles, that is both organised and learned. Identity development is considered a critical psychosocial task across the lifespan (Keniston, 1968; McLean, Syed, McAdams et al., 2015) and is a constructed story of how an individual comes to be who they currently are (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity is believed to develop at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels and comprises of individual, relational and collective identities that interact with each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). Specifically, identity development may be considered the construction of an individuals' self-conceptualisation (Sharma & Sharma, 2010) that is influenced by both cultural and societal factors (Misra, 2007), and is largely studied to determine well-being (Thoits, 2013).

Although identity development is considered to manifest during childhood and early adolescence (McLean, Syed, Fivush et al., 2015) it continues to develop and grow across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015). Thus, the development of an individual's identity can be considered an important lifelong process. According to Stryker (1980), identity involves the integration of 'blocks' which together, build a unified self-concept that enables a person to function with coherence. As such, the development of a positive and well understood identity involves building self-esteem, exploring self-definition, reducing self-discrepancies and fostering role formation and achievement (Tsang et al., 2012). Because of this, research is becoming increasingly concerned with recognising the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual identity development among sexual-minority individuals and specifically, asexual individuals (Morgan, 2013).

## Asexual identity development

Sexuality is considered an aspect of one's identity that can shape their entire character (Kietzer, 2015) and is believed to be affected by both internal and external factors (Mayer et al., 2014). Sexual identity can be conceptualised as involving the cognitive and emotional understanding of an individual's sexuality, including sexual attractions, desires, behaviours, values and relationships (Morgan, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2011). This understanding assists in forming a personally and socially meaningful sense of one's sexual identity (Morgan, 2013) and involves negotiating feelings of instability and transitions, as well as heightened self-focus and identity exploration (Arnett, 2007). However, while sexual identity development for non-heterosexual individuals can be an opportunity for exploration and self-discovery, it can simultaneously be inhibited or contrived (Torkelson, 2012).

The development of an individual's sexual minority identity typically involves a process of becoming aware of themselves as different from their peers, identifying with an orientation that corresponds with their sexual and romantic attractions and disclosing their sexuality to others (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). According to Cass's (1979) Theory of Sexual Identity Formation, identity development among non-heterosexual individuals involves a process of questioning and becoming aware of one's sexuality, exploring that emerging identity and engaging in non-heterosexual related social and sexual activities (Cass, 1979). This process is believed to take time as individuals engage in self-questioning, experimentation and conflict (Rosario et al., 2006). The resulting identity integration is portrayed through both embracing and disclosing a non-heterosexual identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Despite the ongoing relevance of Cass's (1979) model, there is emerging evidence to suggest that sexual identity development does not follow a consistent route and is not stable from person to person (Morgan, 2013). Specifically, recent efforts have been made to account for the complex and dynamic nature of sexual identity to include a multidimensional model that operates at both an individual and societal level (Dillon et al., 2011).

Research suggests that there are many components specific to the development of an asexual identity that differ from the trajectory witnessed among other non-heterosexual groups (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, Robbins et al. (2016) proposed a model of identity development that

contains experiences unique to asexual individuals. Within this model they suggest that a lack of information causes many asexuals to initially question the legitimacy of their asexuality and pathologise their lack of sexual attraction. Moreover, the discovery of an asexual identity is considered a unique process within this model as asexual individuals typically gain information through online resources and asexuality-specific communities. Finally, disclosure is considered a crucial element within this model as external validation and the opportunity to educate others facilitates identity integration (Robbins et al., 2016). Interestingly, when investigating asexual identity formation, Winer et al. (2022), found that approximately half of asexual individuals adopt other sexual identities earlier in their lives. In this respect, bisexuality and pansexuality may function as 'identity pathways' for many asexual individuals prior to the discovery of an asexual identity (Winer et al., 2022). Similar to the invisible nature of asexuality identified within previous models of identity development (Robbins et al., 2016), limited awareness of asexuality may cause many individuals to initially adopt a sexual identity that is more recognisable (Winer et al., 2022).

### Asexual identity development and wellbeing

Sexual identity distress has been shown to significantly predict psychological distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Wright & Perry, 2006). Specifically, anti-queer attitudes and heterosexism, can result in difficulties such as social rejection, isolation and discrimination which in turn, can negatively affect their sexual identity development (Anderson, 2020; Craig et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014). Moreover, marginalisation as a result of sexual identity can lead to higher rates of suicidality and suicidal ideation (Di Giacomo et al., 2018), mental health disorders (Russell & Fish, 2016) and substance abuse (Day et al., 2017) among sexual minority youths. This evidence for the existence of stigma related prejudices against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population has recently been shown to include asexual individuals (Lucassen et al., 2011; Yule et al., 2013). Because of this, the development of an asexual identity and the process of integrating or 'internalising' negative sentiments into one's own self-concept is becoming an increasing focus of research.

During identity development, it is believed that an individual creates their self-image through experiences and associated meanings within their community (Jamil et al., 2009). However, as sexual minority youths are often raised within a predominantly heteronormative society, they do not necessarily encounter similar others and often lack an initial exposure to non-heterosexual communities (Rosario et al., 2006). As a result, they may gain an understanding of society's negative regard towards a non-heterosexual identity and may experience a different developmental trajectory (Morgan, 2013). Like other sexual minority individuals, asexual individuals are believed to internalise their existence outside of heteronormative ideals and standard life events, which in turn, shapes their identity development (McInroy et al., 2020). Moreover, an increasing recognition of sex and sexual attraction as 'natural' and 'necessary' (Kennon, 2021) may further enhance the invisibility and oppression of asexual individuals. For example, 'allonormativity', or the assumption that that all people experience some form of sexual attraction, has been shown to hinder the development and management of asexual identities (Mollet, 2020, 2021). Thus, there is a growing need to address and understand how an asexual identity is constructed within the context of both a heteronormative (Morgan, 2013) and allonormative society (Mollet, 2021).

### The current review

For the purpose of the current review, asexual identity development will be conceptualised with reference to both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development models. This will encompass components of identity development such identity confusion and an awareness of the self as different; discovering asexuality and sources of information; the role of the internet and asexuality-specific communities; identity acceptance and the integration of sexual and romantic identities;

and finally, disclosure of an asexual identity, education and reactions from others. Specifically, we will focus on empirical research that investigates identity development at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, as well as the societal and cultural factors that influence identity development.

This scoping review will bring together research which pertains to asexual identity development and internalisation, with an added focus on whether and how individuals internalise societal messages held towards their asexual identity. Moreover, this review will provide an insight into how individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and diverge from the dominant heterosexual culture and assumed developmental path develop their identities.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis of literature, the research questions directing this review are broad in nature and address the following topics:

- What empirical research, both published and unpublished, has been generated about the development of an asexual identity?
- What attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences specific to asexual individuals shape their self-concept and understanding of their asexual identity?
- What gaps are present within the literature and what is recommended for future progression within this area?

This investigation acts as a significant contribution to our understanding of the key concepts and common experiences underlying the internalisation and development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as the first literature review of its kind, it maps research designs and analytical procedures to direct future research agendas.

## Methodology

Literature reviews utilising a scoping methodology are becoming increasingly prevalent (Moher et al., 2009), highlighting their success and capacity to bring together the research within an area. While there is currently no conclusive definition for a scoping review (Daudt et al., 2013), its main purpose is to provide an overview of a topic (Moher et al., 2015) through the syntheses of available grey and published literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review that is well executed, may make a substantial contribution to an area of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and is considered a rigorous form of literature review.

The broad nature of a scoping review allows for a more generalised research question and subsequent exploration of a wide range of associated literature (Moher et al., 2015). Therefore, this scoping review will allow for the inclusion of all relevant material without the limitations of specific methodological approaches or contexts, whether geographical, cultural or sex based. Moreover, scoping reviews endeavour to articulate what is currently known in an area, including in-depth investigation of key concepts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This is particularly fitting considering our limited understanding of asexual identity development and the way in which asexual individuals internalise their divergence from expected life events and societal norms. This scoping review will include studies that use varying methodologies and analytical approaches to consider what may be deemed a successful research design when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Furthermore, scoping reviews aim to present evidence relevant to a topic irrespective of study quality (Tricco et al., 2016) and are considered useful when mapping an area of research that is novel and emerging. Finally, as scoping reviews present information through mainly narrative presentations (Peterson et al., 2017), this will enhance reporting of the area under investigation, which is mainly qualitative or mixed in design, with limited statistical information. This scoping review will grant the exploration of a breadth of literature, mapping evidence in an assessable and unrestricted way to inform future research (Tricco et al., 2016).

Although relatively novel in nature, investigation surrounding asexuality has developed considerably over the past few decades and can be considered an emerging area of research. Specifically, research has focused on how individuals come to identify as asexual, navigate relationships and disclosure, seek support and integrate within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Robbins et al., 2016). This growth in research poses many theoretical and methodological challenges when studying the development of an asexual identity, such as inconsistent definitions, limited demographic information and restricted gathering of participants through asexuality-specific communities (Mollet, 2020). Thus, this review aims to map the diversity of research questions, methodologies, analytical approaches and theoretical orientations, to identify key concepts and knowledge gaps surrounding the development of an asexual identity. Moreover, as this research aims to extract and synthesise evidence surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation, the participants identified within each included study should maintain some understanding of themselves as asexual. Studies which include participants that do not engage in sexual activity (e.g. members of religious sects) and do not identify as asexual, will not be included for review.

## Method

### *Objectives and research question*

The objective of this scoping review is to provide an insight into the attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences that shape the identity development of asexual individuals, as well as how they internalise societal messages held towards asexuality. This will involve review of both quantitative and qualitative evidence, which will direct the scope of future enquiry into the area of asexuality. Review questions included within this research take inspiration from the review title and as such, advise the formation of inclusion criteria (Khalil et al., 2016).

### *Identifying relevant studies*

#### *Context*

The context of literature reviewed does not require a specific geographical location, nor specified cultural, racial or sex-based factors. The reviewed literature does not require a specific setting nor discipline. This review is concerned solely with the factors that contribute towards asexual identity development and internalisation.

#### *Types of Participants*

Studies which gather data from asexual individuals have been included. When defining asexuality, studies which used self-identification as asexual, behaviours indicative of asexuality (a lack of sexual behaviour) and those which defined asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others were considered appropriate to include. However, regardless of how each study defined asexuality, it was imperative that the participants included had an awareness of the self as asexual and interpreted their experiences through this lens. A specific romantic identity, age or gender category were not deemed factors requiring exclusion.

#### *Types of Studies*

Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were included if written in English and published after 1 January 2000. This cut-off point was considered appropriate as empirical research into asexuality comes predominantly from after this date (Bogaert, 2004).



## Outcomes of this review

This review maps literature surrounding asexual identity development and internalisation. Specifically, this review outlines the experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs common among asexuals, such as coming-out, reactions of others and how they make sense of their asexual identities. In addition to this, methodological frameworks for studying asexuality and suggestions for future methodological approaches are outlined. The findings of this scoping review will be useful in informing the design and implementation of proceeding studies in asexuality and specifically those which focus on identity development and internalisation.

## Search procedure

A librarian specialising in behavioural and social science literature advised on appropriate search strategies and identified relevant bibliographic databases. Specific databases were searched to increase the likelihood of obtaining all relevant studies that fall within the scope of this review. This consisted of the databases EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, MEDLINE, APA PsycArticles, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, APA PsycInfo), Taylor and Francis, PubMed and Springer. In addition to this, grey literature searches were conducted using multiple search engines and databases.

## Search strategy

This review consisted of an extensive database search with carefully selected search terms, followed by the application of strict inclusion/exclusion criteria. Papers were excluded from review if they did not concern an asexual population or did not focus upon the identity development or internalisation (i.e. attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences) of asexual individuals. Following multiple database searches, 29 papers were identified from which to extract and synthesise evidence ([Figure 1](#)). The inclusion/exclusion procedure was phased in several separate stages, including the identification of relevant articles, the screening of each article for inclusion or exclusion and an independent cross-check of included articles by authors. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of 'asexuality' or 'asexual', 'beliefs', 'attitudes', 'experiences', 'identity' and 'value'. This review of literature was conducted across multiple timelines to ensure that the most recently published articles in the area were included in the final analysis.

*1 January 2000–1 May 2019:* A total of 294 papers were imported to the citation manager EndNote to allow for appropriate organisation of papers and to assist in the removal of duplicates. Following an initial removal of duplicates, 277 papers remained – it is important to note that this process did not immediately remove all duplicates and thus, further removal of duplicates was carried out later in the screening of papers. Using a checklist created prior to the screening process, author (SK) and a trained research assistant (XS) screened the remaining papers to determine eligibility. Most papers were excluded based on their title/abstracts. Following initial screening, 129 references were removed. The most common reasons for removal included that papers (a) were not empirical or were purely theoretical in nature, (b) did not examine asexual identity development (e.g. presentation of purely demographic information), or (c) concerned members of other non-heterosexual communities without separate presentation of results pertaining to asexual participants. A second screening resulted in the removal of an additional 127 papers. These papers were removed as they did not investigate the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual identity development or internalisation. Through a second removal of duplicates, five more papers were removed, resulting in a total of 16 papers included for extraction and review.

*1 May 2019–31 March 2020:* An additional review of literature was conducted with the same search terms and databases as the original search. Forty papers were imported to EndNote, with the removal of three duplicates. Upon initial screening of titles and abstracts, 32 papers were removed as they were



not empirical in nature or did not examine the attitudes, values, beliefs or experiences associated with asexual individuals. Following an additional screening, one more paper was removed for the reasons outlined above. This resulted in a total of four papers to be included in the data extraction process.

*1 January 2000–1 July 2021:* A final review of literature was carried out with the same databases as the original search. Search terms were expanded to include ‘asexuality’ or ‘asexual’ and ‘identity development’ or ‘identity formation’ or ‘identity construction’. This yielded 356 papers. Following an initial screening, 328 papers were removed as they were either duplicated, did not meet inclusion criteria, or had already been reviewed in prior searches. The remaining 28 papers underwent content analysis carried out by authors MM and SK. Following content analysis, 17 papers were removed as 15 did not meet inclusion criteria and two were not available to the authors. This resulted in a total of 11 papers from this search to be included in the data extraction process.

### *Data extraction process*

When combined, a total of 31 papers gathered from the database searches were included in the data extraction process. A data extraction spreadsheet was designed to gather all relevant information from the papers included for review. This detailed author names, location and year of publication, the method of investigation and analysis, study design and sample characteristics (sample size, age, gender, relationship status). The major themes produced within each study were listed within this extraction process (see Appendix A). All authors examined the documents and extracted information simultaneously. MM reviewed this process throughout. As this scoping review aims to garner information surrounding our current knowledge of asexual identity development and internalisation, the above categories were considered in a flexible manner. During the data extraction process, a further six papers were removed on the grounds that they did not explore the attitudes, values, experiences, or beliefs specific to the development of an asexual identity. This resulted in 25 empirical papers being included in this scoping review.

### *Search strategy: grey literature*

Several databases and search engines were utilised during the grey literature search. Unlike the database search, a specific timeline was not identified. SK conducted several trials to determine search-engines that were most appropriate to retrieve and rank results that aligned with this scoping review. This resulted in the use of search engines dedicated to web-based resources such Google Search, DuckDuckGo and Dogpile. The first 100 results retrieved from each search-engine were considered for review. Dissertations and theses were searched using Ethos by British Library, Dart Europe E-Thesis Portal, and repositories such as OpenGrey, Oaister/Worldcat, Core and Base. Conference proceedings were obtained through Web of Science and Research Gate. Search strategies remained consistent across resources and were derived from terms used in the bibliographic search. The order of search terms varied depending on each site but included the major themes of ‘asexuality’ or ‘asexual’, ‘beliefs’, ‘attitudes’, ‘experiences’, ‘identity’ and ‘value’. There was a considerable overlap between resources and many results had already appeared in the bibliographic search. Dissertations, theses and conference proceedings were excluded from review if they did not concern components of asexual identity development and internalisation. Four articles were selected for data extraction.

### *Methodological quality*

As this scoping review is exploratory in nature with an overarching aim to provide further information on asexual identity development and internalisation, an assessment of methodological quality was not performed. This allowed for the inclusion of all available literature in the area. Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews do not necessarily assess the quality of literature (Khalil et al., 2016).

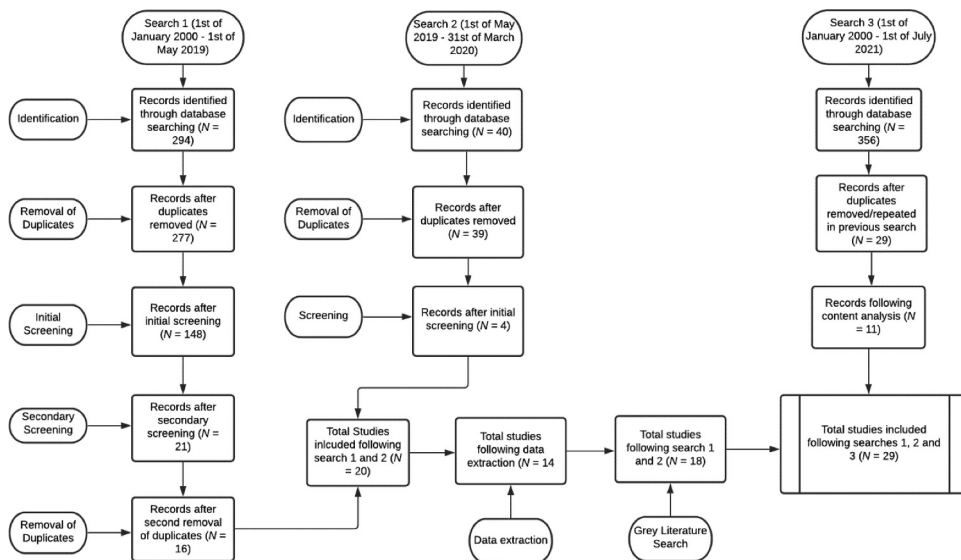


Figure 1. Flow diagram illustrating literature search and selection.

## Analysing the data

Results were reviewed by authors SK and MM. The research team identified, coded and charted relevant units of text from the articles as outlined by (Tricco et al., 2016) with a focus on findings that pertained to elements of asexual identity development and/or internalisation.

## Results

A total of twenty-nine articles were included for review. Key details from each article were charted and summarised to include author information, year of publication, sample information, study design and main findings (see Table A1). Although a variety of methodologies were utilised across studies, the majority were qualitative in design and analysis ( $N = 23$ ), with some quantitative ( $N = 3$ ) or mixed design ( $N = 3$ ). Mixed-methods or quantitative studies performed mainly descriptive analyses of the attitudes and characteristics associated with an asexual population and charted demographic information. The method of analysis implemented across qualitative studies were mainly phenomenological, grounded theory and ethnographic. The most common rationale given for this choice of qualitative methodology was a desire to examine asexual individuals' personal perceptions of an event or experience. The prevalence of this choice of methodology coincides with the overarching aim of this scoping review which is also concerned with the accounts or sense-making processes of asexual individuals. Articles were produced predominantly within Western societies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. When identifying asexual participants within research, most studies ( $N = 27$ ) used self-identification as an operational definition for asexuality. Several studies maintained the assumption that when recruiting through resources such as AVEN, participants should understand asexuality as 'a lack of sexual desire/attraction' and therefore, participants who self-identified as asexual were included in the research. One study used the 'Asexual Identification Scale' (AIS) when recruiting participants and another used a combination of self-identification as asexual and participant description of asexuality as 'not experiencing sexual attraction'. As most studies utilised self-identification as a definition for asexuality, a comparison of findings based on differing definitions for asexuality was not possible.

When analysed thematically, eight themes were generated to represent key findings across literature. These themes were identified as the following:

- Understanding Asexuality
- Coming to an Asexual Identity
- Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
- Isolation and Invisibility
- Disclosure
- Individual Differences
- Negotiating Relationships
- Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion

### *Understanding asexuality*

Existing literature emphasises how asexuality is understood by asexuals and the implications that this may have when making sense of an asexual identity. Research suggests that asexuals understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often discovered through engagement with asexual communities and online forums.

Asexuality is understood predominantly within the asexual community as a lack of sexual attraction directed towards others (Andersson, 2010; Brotto et al., 2010; Scherrer, 2008). An example of this can be seen in research conducted by Brotto et al. (2010), in which asexual participants described alternative motives for relationships and non-sexual forms of attraction. Similarly, Maxwell (2017) found that while asexuality may be connected to multiple forms of attraction, such attractions are based upon non-sexual desires, predominantly romantic with a focus on intellectual intimacy. Further examples of this can be seen within research conducted by Mitchell & Hunnicutt (2019) and Van Houdenhove et al. (2015), in which asexual participants note their ability to consider others as 'aesthetically pleasing' without sexual attraction.

Moreover, evidence suggests that sex and romance are perceived as two very separate constructs of desire within the asexual community. For example, attitudes towards romance do not differ significantly between asexual and allosexual participants. An example of this is seen within Bulmer & Izuma's (2018) comparison of asexual and allosexual participants' attitudes towards sex and romance. This research shows that while asexual participants typically display more negative attitudes towards sex, they do not differ significantly from allosexuals in terms of their implicit attitudes towards romance. Similarly, research suggests that asexual women are more open towards romance and romantic attraction without an element of sexual desire (Foster et al., 2019). This understanding of romantic and sexual desire as different is seen throughout the literature and appears key in forming participants' understanding of their asexual identities.

Finally, imperative to understanding one's asexuality is a sense of community gained when identifying as asexual. Research suggests that a sense of difference associated with discovering an asexual identity may be subdued by the concept of an asexual community or asexuality-specific support groups (Carrigan, 2011; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). For example, a shared sense of community and exposure to others' accounts of asexuality has been shown to allow participants to move beyond individualised self-questioning and assists in the understanding of their asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

### *Coming to an asexual identity*

Much of the literature emphasises components of coming to an asexual identity, including an awareness of the self as different and feelings of otherness within a sexualised society. For example, feelings of disparity when comparing the self with peers, is a common experience among asexuals, and for many, marks the beginning of their asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020; Savage, 2019). Moreover, this sense of difference may result in feelings of otherness and self-questioning among asexuals (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and may initiate the process of discovering an asexual identity (Carrigan, 2011). However, research suggests that coming to an asexual identity may be a nuanced or 'fluid' process, that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). For example, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021) have been shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual. Moreover, within their proposed model of asexual identity development Robbins et al., (2016), acknowledge that awareness of one's asexual identity does not follow a linear progression and is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities.

The internet appears to play a large role when discovering and making sense of an asexual identity. For example, the internet and social media outlets act as a source of information among asexuals (Andersson, 2010; Foster et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019) and have been shown to assist in the validation of an asexual experience as well as the coming out process (Robbins et al., 2016). Specifically, asexual participants have identified AVEN as a particularly useful source of information, both for their own validation, as well as a source of reference for friends and family members (Robbins et al., 2016).

Imperative to coming to an asexual identity is the ability to embrace one's sexuality and to adopt this as part of the self. Current literature conveys a sense of 'embracing' asexuality upon discovering its existence (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015). Moreover, literature suggests a sense of 'relief' when learning about asexuality and adopting an asexual identity (Andersson, 2010; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2021).

### *Stigmatisation and the need to educate*

Stigmatisation and the dismissal of asexuality is witnessed throughout literature. This stigmatisation appears to be a typical experience among participants and is considered by many to stem from the imposition of sexuality within society. These experiences of stigmatisation and a general lack of information surrounding asexuality brings forth a sense of obligation to educate others on asexuality.

Foster et al. (2019) reported the social rejection of participants' asexuality through allosexuals' assumptions that their lack of sexual interest is due to mental illness or childhood trauma. Such findings have been reproduced across literature, whereby asexuality lacks credibility within sexualised cultures (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Robbins et al., 2016), and asexuals are often advised to seek medical or psychological explanations/treatments for their lack of sexual desire (Gupta, 2017). Participants have described others' consideration of asexuality as a 'phase' (Carrigan, 2011) 'mental or medical condition', or as a result of an abusive relationship (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). These experiences of stigmatisation appear to stem from a lack of information and the imposition of sexuality by society (Foster et al., 2019). Moreover, the presence of microaggressions and divergence from sexual and romantic expectations has brought many asexuals to experience 'shame' surrounding their lack of sexual attraction (Deutsch, 2018; Vares, 2021, p. 7) and a sense of the self as different or incomplete (Savage, 2019). For example, many asexual participants have been shown to adopt a negative understanding of asexuality and attribute their lack of sexual attraction to conditions such as Asperger's Syndrome and problematic childhood experiences (Andersson, 2010). Again, these findings are considered to evolve as

a negative result of ‘compulsory sexuality’ in which being sexual, irrespective of sexual identity, is favoured over ‘non-sexualness’ or asexuality (Gupta, 2015). According to the reviewed literature, the sources of this stigma may include family, friends, religious institutions and medical professionals, some members of non-heterosexual communities and the sexualisation of media and advertising (Deutsch, 2018; Gupta, 2017; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019).

Research suggests that experiences of stigmatisation have led to a ‘strong desire among asexuals’ to educate others on the existence of asexuality (Brotto et al., 2010). This sense of obligation to inform others about asexuality stems from a need to destigmatise and address misconceptions (Brotto et al., 2010; Savage, 2019), increase visibility (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017) and legitimise asexuality (Scherrer, 2008). Findings from Gupta (2017), indicate a motivation for political/social change stemming predominantly from experiences of marginalisation and subsequent engagement in outreach activities and visibility work. This was also seen within research conducted by Mollet (2020, 2021), in which many asexuals considered their roles in volunteer efforts and educational initiatives as a responsibility and felt compelled to enhance information surrounding asexuality. Moreover, many asexuals express the need for increased research surrounding asexuality, to enhance self-identification and legitimate sources of information (Brotto et al., 2010; Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate a common experience of stigmatisation that is resisted through a shared obligation to educate others and promote an awareness of asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity.

### *Isolation and invisibility*

Current literature suggests a common experience of invisibility and social isolation among asexual individuals. This invisibility of asexuality appears to stem predominantly from sexualised cultures and allonormativity. For example, Vares (2021, p. 7), reported that representations of the heteronormative ideal, such as ‘the happy family’ are considered ‘inescapable’ by some asexual participants, with limited offline contact and few groups available for support. Such findings appear consistent across literature, with many participants reporting a lack of social credibility, denial, and invisibility of asexuality (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2020; Rossi, 2017; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2018). This consideration of asexuality as invisible appears as a source of ‘angst’ for some individuals (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518), making it harder for them to come out (Dawson et al., 2016). Moreover, allonormativity has been shown to influence asexual individuals’ identity management in multiple ways and contributes towards invisibility, invalidity, and the erasure of asexuals (Mollet, 2021). When examining the role of allonormativity within higher education, Mollet (2020, 2021), found that many asexual participants internalised allonormative ideals and questioned their asexuality. This sense of doubt surrounding participants’ asexual identities was reinforced by lack of exposure to asexuality and perpetuated a sense of isolation (Mollet, 2020). Moreover, this sense of isolation and invisibility is reinforced by the sexualisation of media and advertising, as well as the power of sex within marketing and the communication of sexual relationships as ‘normal’ (Gupta, 2017; Mollet, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2019; Savage, 2019; Vares, 2021). Interestingly, while participants attributed this social anonymity to a lack of awareness of asexuality, some also considered this as a result of disguising their asexuality (Mollet, 2020, 2021) or the ability to ‘fake being sexual’ (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019, p. 518).

### *Disclosure*

According to current literature, there are several factors influencing an individual’s willingness to disclose their asexual identity. Such factors range from a desire to increase awareness of asexuality, to apprehension surrounding a fear of dismissal and alienation. Moreover, research suggests that reactions towards participants’ disclosure is related to others’ awareness of asexuality.

Findings from Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) reveal that while selective in the disclosure of their asexual identities, participants felt that coming-out was necessary to increase awareness of asexuality. Research suggests that many asexual individuals consider disclosure as 'necessary' to increase visibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019, p. 132; Robbins et al., 2016), and for some, is an opportunity to no longer hide their lack of sexual attraction (Rossi, 2017). Despite this, evidence suggests that coming out is a selective process within the asexual community (Foster et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2016), with many asexuals considering disclosure as 'unnecessary irrespective of circumstances' (Mollet, 2021). For example, Robbins et al. (2016) found that some asexual participants engaged in an internal process of identity acceptance and felt that coming out was not salient to their identities. Moreover, they noted that many participants considered disclosure as relevant only within romantic relationships or when addressing questions surrounding dating and finding a partner (Robbins et al., 2016).

Research suggests that many asexuals fear disclosure due to invisibility and denial within sexualised cultures (Rossi, 2017; Savage, 2019). This apprehensiveness surrounding disclosure reportedly stems from a fear of stigmatisation (Robbins et al., 2016) and invisibility of asexuality (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). For example, dismissal, expected or experienced, from friends, family and potential partners (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Mollet, 2021; Rossi, 2017; Vares, 2018), as well as others' assumption of sexual pathology, has been shown to hinder the coming out process (McInroy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021; Rothblum et al., 2020). According to Mollet (2020), this denial or 'erasure' of asexuality perpetuates invisibility and contributes towards asexual individuals' beliefs that others are unwilling to accept or recognise their asexual identities. Moreover, many asexual participants have recalled experiences of erasure when disclosing their asexual identities to members of non-heterosexual communities and associated organisations (Mollet, 2020, 2021; Savage, 2019). Again, this dismissal appears to stem from allo-normativity and negative assumptions held by some members of non-heterosexual communities and has caused many asexual individuals to refrain from sharing their identities within these spaces (Mollet, 2021).

Despite these concerns surrounding disclosure, support and acceptance from others is also seen throughout the reviewed literature. Findings from Robbins et al. (2016) indicated positive reactions towards disclosure that were related to an increased understanding and awareness of asexuality. Moreover, despite the existence of fear surrounding disclosure, Rothblum et al. (2020) reported an availability of social support that did not differ significantly from the experiences of other sexual minorities. Such experiences of support and understanding are also seen in research conducted by Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019), in which some participants report acceptance and understanding when coming out to family and friends.

### *Individual differences*

While the asexual community holds many commonalities, research suggests that there are a diverse range of attitudes and sub-identities that act to distinguish asexual individuals. This can be seen through the presence of both romantic and aromantic identities, varying attitudes towards sex and relationships, and differing sentiments regarding the significance of asexuality to one's self-concept. An example of such diversity can be seen within research conducted by Carrigan (2011) and Rossi (2017), in which participants presented varying attitudes towards sex, such as 'sex positive', 'sex-neutral', 'sex-averse' and 'anti-sex'. Additionally, research indicates the presence of 'demi-sexuals', whereby participants experience sexual attraction based on romantic desire (Carrigan, 2011), or intermittent sexual attraction while still identifying as asexual (Foster et al., 2019).

Romantic and aromantic identities are also shown to exist within the asexual community (Bulmer & Izuma, 2018; Scherrer, 2008). Distinctions between the two typically appear when describing an 'ideal relationship', with aromantic asexuals often considering this as 'friendship like' and romantic asexuals describing some level of physical intimacy and a preference for monogamy (Carrigan, 2011;



Scherrer, 2008, p. 623). Moreover, when investigating sexual attraction and behaviour among asexual individuals, McInroy et al. (2020) found that over half of self-identified asexual participants ( $N = 711$ ) had experienced some form of sexual and/or romantic attraction. This corresponds with the concept that asexuality is diverse, with varying levels of attraction and differing experiences of sexual and romantic relationships. The presence of diverse sexual and romantic identities has previously been interpreted through the 'split attraction model' (SAM), whereby sexual and romantic attraction are considered separate constructs that can occur independently of one another (Przybyło, 2022). This model, which encompasses additional forms of attraction such as aesthetic, sensual, platonic, emotional and intellectual attraction, has been considered useful when understanding the nuances that underlie asexual and (a)romantic identities (Carroll, 2020; Przybyło, 2022; Winer et al., 2022). Despite this, the SAM has recently received conjecture from some individuals within the asexual community, as many feel it conflates attraction and orientation models (Coyote., 2019a, 2019b). As such, it may be more appropriate to consider this model as a guide to understanding the distinctions that underlie asexual identities and position it within broader terms such as 'differentiated attraction/orientation' (Sennkestra., 2020). This may remove the assumption that the SAM is a single coherent model that is unvarying across asexual communities and may grant greater flexibility and versatility in asexual individuals' use of labels when referring to their romantic and sexual identities.

The literature also indicates that asexual individuals differ in their experience of being asexual and the value that they place on their asexual identity. An example of this can be seen within research conducted by Dawson et al. (2016), where many participants described the coming out process as important, while others considered it socially unnecessary with no pragmatic purpose. Moreover, several participants recounted a 'Eureka' moment when first discovering the term asexual, while others considered this euphoria as short lived and quickly moved on following discovery (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 16).

### *Negotiating relationships*

Existing research emphasises how asexual individuals negotiate and understand intimate relationships. This includes the negotiation of intimate boundaries, loyalties and partnerships; the motivations to engage in a relationship; and doubts surrounding the feasibility of an intimate relationship with an allosexual partner.

The process of negotiating sexual boundaries and the resulting arrangements held between asexuals and allosexual partners is documented across literature. This can be seen through asexual participants' willingness to engage in some form of sexual activity with an allosexual partner (Gupta, 2017; Haefner, 2011; Jolene Sloan, 2015), and consideration of sex as a compromise within relationships (Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020). Interestingly, research suggests that BDSM communities allow some asexuals the opportunity to find partners and engage in intimate activities that do not rely on sexual desire (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Vares, 2018; Winter-Gray & Hayfield, 2021). Moreover, many asexuals report engaging in open relationships to maintain partnerships with allosexuals (Gupta, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), and consider infidelity as romantic rather than sexual engagement with others (Brotto et al., 2010). Despite this, research also suggests that some asexuals engage in consensual sex due to societal pressures (Gupta, 2017), feel unable to communicate their asexuality or come to an agreement with their partners (Dawson et al., 2019; Savage, 2019).

Asexual participants describe several motivations for engaging in relationships with both asexual and allosexual partners. These motivations appear to stem from a desire to gain intellectual intimacy (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), achieve long-term monogamy and a traditional family structure (Vares, 2018, 2021), and for some, adhere to cultural expectations and gender role expressions (Foster et al., 2019). However, research also suggests a sense of doubt surrounding the perceived possibility of a relationship. For example, many asexuals question the practicality of a sexless relationship (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and describe an inactive approach to finding a partner due to these perceived difficulties (Maxwell, 2017; Vares, 2018, 2021). Moreover, many



asexuals consider their chances of finding a partner as 'low' and often dismiss non-sexual closeness in friendships due to a fear of 'something more' (Dawson et al., 2019, pp. 11–14). Interestingly, some asexuals considered a relationship with another asexual individual as unlikely due to a lack of accessibility (Vares, 2018).

### *Conservative sexual beliefs and religion*

The evidence that surrounds asexual participants' religious beliefs and conservative views is sparse and conflicting at times. Such discrepancies can be seen through varying reports of religiosity, as well as differing levels of conservative sexual beliefs across studies. For example, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) suggest that many asexuals use Catholic discourse to explain their asexuality, Brotto et al. (2010) and Rothblum et al. (2019), found a higher proportion of atheism within their samples. Moreover, while Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) found Catholicism to be significant point of reference among asexuals, Brotto et al. (2010), found that asexuality was more often related to non-conformist ideals, as well as an objection to religious values. In addition to this, Carvalho et al. (2017), reported the presence of more sexually conservative beliefs among asexuals, although this is yet to be addressed within future research.

## **Discussion**

This scoping review presents several important findings about the attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences that underpin asexual identity development, as well as the process of internalising societal messages held towards asexuality. An analysis of the available literature has generated a list of provisory themes that describe components of asexual identity development and provides a unique contribution to our current knowledge of asexuality. The themes identified within this review appear consistently throughout literature highlighting their relevance and importance when investigating asexual identity development and internalisation. Moreover, features of identity development presented within this research correspond with existing theoretical models of both non-heterosexual and asexual identity development. It must be noted that the themes presented within this research are not prescriptive of asexual identity development and do not account for the varied experiences, sub-identities or genders present within the asexual population.

### *Theoretical implications and suggestions for future research*

The articles included in this review were mainly qualitative in design and produced largely descriptive accounts of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs that may shape asexual identity development and internalisation. The reoccurring use of qualitative methods within the reviewed literature corresponds with an overarching aim to gain insights into the thoughts and feelings of participants (Austin & Sutton, 2014), as well as current attempts to broaden our understanding of asexual identities and experiences associated with asexuality (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Moreover, summarising the available qualitative research grants an additional layer to the value of this scoping review and may be used to inform the design and implementation of future quantitative enquiries.

Existing literature emphasises the key events and sense-making processes that underlie asexual identity development and internalisation, such as coming-out, the reactions of others and how asexuals interpret their lack of sexual attraction. Evidence suggests that asexual individuals typically understand asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction that is independent of romantic attraction and often recognise their asexuality through exposure to asexual communities. Identification as asexual appears to follow a common trajectory that is initiated through self-questioning and confirmed through online supports such as AVEN. Moreover, these findings are indicative of the term asexuality as hidden and not commonly recognised prior to exposure to online resources. The literature also presents a common experience of stigmatisation and social dismissal of one's sexual identity. This

fear of dismissal and a lack of awareness from others appears to impact participants' willingness to disclose their asexual identities and reinforces a desire to educate others and increase awareness of asexuality. Finally, the literature suggests alternative motivations to engage in romantic relationships, as well as asexual individuals' concerns that underly intimacy and loyalties within partnerships. Despite such commonalities, research also presents a diverse range of attitudes and identities present within the asexual community. This is witnessed through the existence of diverse romantic (e.g. aromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic and homoromantic) and sexual (e.g. asexual, demi-sexual and grey-asexual) identities, as well as varying levels of significance placed on one's asexual identity. Moreover, there was a diverse range of ages and genders (e.g. male, female, transgender, agender and genderqueer) reported within the reviewed literature.

### *The role of heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality*

Heteronormativity and 'compulsory sexuality' appeared as key concepts underpinning the research area of asexuality and specifically, literature surrounding the experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values of asexual individuals. Heteronormativity can be considered to relate to the promotion of heterosexuality as a societally preferred sexual identity, whereas compulsory sexuality pertains to 'the common assumption that everyone is defined by some type of sexual attraction' (Emens, 2014, p. 303). Although the influence of these concepts was seen predominantly within literature investigating asexual individuals' experiences of stigmatisation, isolation and invisibility, they were evident throughout all themes listed within this scoping review. Moreover, there appeared to be consistent evidence for allosexuals' negative sentiments held towards asexuality and the impact that this has on asexual individuals' identity development and internalisation.

Throughout the reviewed literature, there was repeated reference to allosexuals' dismissal of asexuality as some form of physical or psychological disorder. This is consistent with the values of heteronormativity (Robertson, 2014) and allonormativity and thus, may lead to more a distressing sexual questioning process (Boyer & Lorenz, 2020). The influence of these heteronormative and allonormative ideals was apparent within literature through feelings of stigmatisation and alienation and appeared to instil a negative understanding of asexuality among some asexual participants. Isolation and 'erasure' also appeared as recurring sentiments throughout literature, as asexual individuals reported a sense of difference from their peers (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Foster et al., 2019; Mollet, 2020, 2021). Moreover, a common experience of invisibility reported within the literature corresponds with the pressures of compulsory sexuality and how this may hinder the recognition of an asexual identity among asexual individuals (Winer et al., 2022). It was apparent that many participants internalised this sense of difference surrounding their asexuality and as a result, were seen to doubt or question their asexual identities. This is reminiscent of past literature surrounding the influence of heteronormativity and how this may exclude and marginalise non-heterosexual individuals (Rich, 1980). Moreover, these findings may be likened to research surrounding other sexual minority identities in which isolation and a sense of difference may lead to a greater risk for psychological damage (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). Future research should consider the impact that stigmatisation, isolation and dismissal may have on asexual individuals' wellbeing, granting greater insight into the problems that they may face when coming to an asexual identity. It is apparent that the imposition of sexual norms within society may negatively impact asexual individuals' cohesive sense of identity (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015) and thus, further investigation is required to better understand asexual individuals' experiences of overcoming both heteronormative and allonormative ideals (Winer et al., 2022). While there is much evidence surrounding asexuals' experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation, the impact of minority stress and the influence that this may have on their well-being is yet to be comprehensively investigated. According to Friedman (1999), stigmatisation and prejudice directed at a minority group can result in a stressful environment that may lead to physical and/or mental health problems. Interestingly, this minority stress can be linked to concealment of sexual identity (Meyer, 2003) and has been shown to have far-reaching health

implications for lesbian and gay people (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). As this scoping review has identified reports of stigmatisation within the asexual population, future research should consider how this is internalised by asexuals and the implications that this may have on their wellbeing. This may grant insight into the challenges faced by asexuals, as well as the resources available to counter stigmatisation and prejudice.

### *Asexual Identity Development*

The themes present within this scoping review relate closely to stages of non-heterosexual identity development (Cass, 1979) and elements specific to asexual identity development (Robbins et al., 2016). Throughout literature, there is consistent evidence of how asexual individuals come to discover, understand and identify with asexuality, as well as the processes surrounding the disclosure of their asexual identity. Cass's (1979) initial stages of 'Identity Confusion' and 'Identity Comparison' are evident within the literature as a consideration of the self as different from peers marks the beginning of an individual's asexual identity. Moreover, repeated reports of self-questioning, pathologising and subsequent searching is consistent with the components unique to asexual identity development. The third and fourth stages of Cass's model, 'Identity Acceptance' and 'Identity Pride', are seen within the literature through varying reports of asexual individuals' embracing their asexuality and gaining a sense of asexual community. Specifically, online resources and asexual communities are shown to assist in the development of an asexual identity and correspond with current understanding of asexual identity development. According to Harper et al. (2016), online communities assist in developing non-heterosexual identities by providing a safe space of recognition and self-acceptance. As seen throughout the reviewed literature, these online spaces allow asexual individuals to develop their sense of identity within a larger community. Moreover, the asexual community acts to ameliorate feelings of marginalisation and isolation deriving from heteronormativity and allonormativity, which as a result fosters a positive self-concept and identity among asexual individuals. Finally, disclosure of an asexual identity and a need to educate others on asexuality appears repeatedly throughout literature, further highlighting its applicability within the development of an asexual identity.

Despite the relevance of themes presented within this scoping review to the stages identified within non-heterosexual identity development models, there are several instances which portray asexual identity development as a non-linear process. For example, much of the literature suggests that developing and maintaining an asexual identity may be a nuanced or fluid process that is subject to varying experiences and sub-identities (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Robbins et al., 2016). This is seen within the literature as visibility, culture, gender expectations and religious ideologies are shown to hinder the recognition of many participants' asexuality and their ability to express themselves as asexual (Foster et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mollet, 2021). As a result, findings from this scoping review confirm a growing awareness of the multifaceted nature of asexual identity development (Winer et al., 2022).

Further research is required to establish the process of asexual identity development, as well as the factors contributing to how asexual individuals internalise their lack of sexual attraction. This may include investigation into the multifaceted nature of asexual identities and how they interact to shape asexual identity development. Moreover, future research should consider how asexual identity development coincides with and differs from that of other sexual minority identities. This will provide greater insight into the unique attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences that contribute towards asexual identity development. Finally, as many asexual individuals report discoveries through online forums, future research should investigate the influence of online support and its role in amending this sense of difference.

## *Relationships and theories of love*

When considering asexual individuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, much of the literature indicates a desire to gain intellectual or emotional intimacy without sexual desire (Maxwell, 2017; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015; Vares, 2018, 2021). These findings may be interpreted through Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, whereby love comprises of three independent components namely, 'intimacy', 'passion' and 'decision/commitment'. According to Sternberg (1986, 1997), these components are motivational needs that are present in varying degrees within relationships and can combine to form varying 'love styles'. Of relevance are the parts 'intimacy' and 'commitment' in which Sternberg (1986) theorised that an individual can experience closeness, connectedness and 'bondedness' towards a partner without the presence of 'passion' or what is interpreted as sexual desire. This notion that intimate emotions can be felt without sexual desire, may tie in with asexuals' motivations to engage in interpersonal partner relationships, while also providing a useful framework for better understanding their experiences within these relationships. As such, the findings present within this review may act as an argument for the Sternberg model in that different forms of love are possible such as commitment and intimacy without the presence of sexual desire.

Moreover, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity also appear as factors contributing to asexual individuals' desire to engage in a partner relationship. Although asexuals' experience of sex is investigated within the current literature, conformity and the influence of sexual normativity is yet to be expanded upon. While this review does identify the influence of societal pressures (Gupta, 2017) and a desire to maintain relationships (Foster et al., 2019), there is a need to further investigate asexuals' reasons for having sex and the implications that this may have on their understanding of their asexual identity. Thus, future research should examine the presence of these emotion-based incentives and how they may align with Sternberg's model of love.

## *The asexual community as heterogeneous*

Studies typically reported a diverse range of ages, romantic orientations and genders within their participant pools. This reinforces an awareness of the asexual community as heterogeneous (Brotto & Yule, 2017), and corresponds with previous findings surrounding its widespread diversity (Weis et al., 2017). Moreover, this demonstrates the diverse nature of asexual identity development and how the integration of gender and sexuality within a heteronormative society may account for variability within asexual individuals' experiences (Cuthbert, 2019). This is seen within the reviewed literature as participants' departure from societally expected gender roles and sexual norms threatened their positive self-perceptions and subsequent identity development (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Moreover, gender appears to play a fundamental role within asexual individuals' experiences of dating and relationships, as well as allosexuals' reactions towards the disclosure of their asexual identities. For example, female asexuals' lack of sexual attraction may be dismissed as sexual passivity (Vares, 2018) with some allosexuals considering them to 'tease' or 'lead on' their partners (Haefner, 2011). Conversely, sexual desire is considered inherent to male participants' gender identity, with some allosexuals disbelieving their lack of sexual drive and questioning their masculinity (Vares, 2018). Thus, the employment of heteronormative feminine and masculine sexuality, as well as allonormativity, may contribute towards the denial of asexual individuals' lack of sexual attraction in ways that are specific to their preferred gender identity.

Considering the diverse nature of the asexual community, future research should examine the influence of varying sub-identities on asexual identity development. This may include the intersection of queer identities (e.g. transgender and gender non-conforming people) and asexuality, as well as the role of racism, sexism and ableism within asexual identity development (Foster et al., 2019). This may allow greater inclusivity within research and grant insight into the complexity of asexual participants' experiences (Antonsen et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019).

## Limitations

The generalisability of themes produced within this review is limited due to the nature of the participant pools involved. As most studies gained participants through online communities and asexuality specific platforms, this may not represent the experiences of asexuals who are not exposed to online forums. Thus, this brings forth the need to investigate the identity development and internalisation of asexual individuals that are not recruited through asexuality specific platforms or communities.

Moreover, there were several limitations surrounding the methodology of this scoping review. Firstly, the search strategy excluded studies published in a language other than English, leaving open the possibility of important national and/or cultural differences. Secondly, as scoping reviews do not require a quality assessment of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), our reporting of these results may be subjective in nature. Finally, as our understanding of asexuality and the language used to describe asexual identities continues to evolve, the search terms used within this study may have led to the exclusion of some published literature. This is particularly relevant to research published earlier within the area of asexuality.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Charted articles included in the scoping review.

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
1	Andersson (2010) Country = Sweden	Age: not specified Gender: Female (N = 5), Male (N = 1) Sample Size = 6	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Combined Analysis of Content Analysis, Interviews and Observations Collection: Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate
2	Brotto et al. (2010) Country = Canada	Age: Range = 20–57 Gender: Male (N = 4), Female (N = 11) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships
3	Bulmer and Izuma (2018) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Female (M = 21.11), Male (M = 21.82) Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (N = 14), Male (N = 3), Other (N = 1) Gender (Control): Female (N = 23), Male (N = 4) Sample Size = 45 (18 Asexuals, 27 Controls)	Study Design: Between Group Comparison Method of Analysis: Quantitative Collection: Online questionnaire and paper questionnaire	Understanding Asexuality Individual Differences
4	Carrigan (2011) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = Interviews (N = 8) online questionnaires (N = 130)	Study Design: Qualitative & Quantitative Design Method of Analysis: Mixed Method Collection: Interviews & Online Questionnaire	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences
5	Carvalho et al. (2017) Country = Portugal	Age (Asexual Participants): Female (M = 22.7, SD = 4.8), Male (M = 22.4, SD = 4.1) Age (Control Participants): Female (M = 22.5, SD = 2.9), Male (M = 22.4, SD = 2.7) Gender (Asexual Participants): Female (N = 68), Male (N = 19) Gender (Control): Female (N = 58), Male (N = 19) Sample Size = 164 (91 Asexuals, 81 Controls)	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) Collection: Online Questionnaires	Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion
6	Dawson et al. (2019) Country = Scotland	Age: 76% < 29 years of age, 24% ≥ 30 years of age. Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 50	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Symbolic Interactionist Theory Collection: Diary Writing and Interview Accounts	Negotiating Relationships
7	Deutsch (2018) Country = United States	Age: (M = 22.27, SD = 2.24) Gender: Female (N = 11) Sample Size = 11	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Analysis Collection: Semi-structured Interview	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
8	Foster et al. (2019) Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–51 (M = 25.9, Median = 22.5, SD = 10.14) Gender: Female (N = 5), Bio-female (N = 1), Cis-female (N = 2), Cis-woman (N = 1), 'Asexual' (N = 1) Sample Size = 11	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Consensual Qualitative Research Collection: Semi-structured Interviews	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Individual Differences
9	Gupta (2017) Country = United States	Age: Range = 19–50 (M = 29, SD = 9.5) Gender: Female (70%), Male (23%), Trans woman (N = 1), Other (1) Sample Size = 30	Study Design: Qualitative Research Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: In-depth semi structured interview (in-person and over phone)	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences Isolation and Invisibility Negotiating Relationships
10	Haefner Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–55, 18–21 (N = 29); 22–25 (N = 19); 26–30 (N = 8); 31–35 (N = 4); 36; 40 (N = 0); 41–45 (N = 1); 46–50 (N = 1); 51–55 (N = 1) *One participant did not give their age Gender: F (N = 37), M (N = 12), Agender (N = 9), Gender Queer (N = 8), Other (N = 6), Pangender (N = 1), Transgender (N = 1) Sample Size = 64	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory Collection: Two online surveys	
11	Kurowicka and Przybylo (2020) Country = Poland	Age: Not Specified Gender: Not Specified Sample Size: Not Specified	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Not Specified Collection: Analysis of Online Forums (Sieć Edukacji Aseksualnej or SEA – translated as the Asexual Education Network)	Conservative Sexual Belief and Religion
12	MacNeela and Murphy (2015) Country = Ireland	Age: Range = 18–58 (M = 26.10, SD = 9.96) Gender: Female (31), Male (15), Other (18) unspecified (2) Sample Size = 66	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Online Questionnaires	Understanding Asexuality Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility
13	Maxwell (2017) Country = United Kingdom	Age: < 30 (N = 22), ≤ 35 (N = 4), >35 (N = 3) Gender: Female (N = 22), Male (N = 7), Agender (N = 2), Non-gender (N = 5), Demi-female (N = 2), Cisgender (N = 12), Androgynous (N = 1) Sample Size (completed surveys) = 68 Sample Size (completed survey and interview) = 29	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Online Surveys and Online Interviews.	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Negotiating Relationships
14	McInroy et al. (2020) Country = United States of America & Canada	Age: Range = 14–24, Mean = 17.43 Gender: Non-binary (N = 306), Female (N = 214), Genderqueer (N = 169), Trans Man (N = 127), Male (N = 42), Trans Woman (N = 12), Two Spirit (N = 11), Other (N = 9) Sample Size: 711	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Quantitative Analysis, demographic analysis Collection: Online Survey	Coming to an Asexual Identity Disclosure Individual Differences

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
15	Mitchell and Hunnicutt (2019) Country = United States	Age: Not Specified Gender: Female (N = 6), Male (N = 2), M-questioning (N = 1), Agender (N = 1) Sample Size = 10	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative – not specified Collection: Modified life story narrative approach with an open-ended interview process	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
16	Mollet (2020) Country = United States of America	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender, Agender (N = 1); Cisgender Woman (N = 4); Agender, Transgender (N = 1); Agender, Transmasculine (N = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (N = 1); Nonbinary (N = 2); Cisgender Man (N = 2) Sample Size = 12	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded Theory Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
17	Mollet (2021) Country = United States of America	Age: Not Specified Gender: Male, Transgender, Agender (N = 1); Cisgender Woman (N = 4); Agender, Transgender (N = 1); Agender, Transmasculine (N = 1); Genderqueer, Transgender (N = 1); Nonbinary (N = 2); Cisgender Man (N = 2) Sample Size = 12	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Grounded theory Collection: Open Interview (phase 1) and Focus Group (phase 2)	Stigmatisation and the Need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure
18	Robbins et al. (2016) Country: United States	Age: Range = 18–25 (71%), 26–32 (20%), 33 and over (8%) Gender: Female (69%), Male (16%), Unidentified (15%) Sample Size = 169	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
19	Rossi (2017) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 20–45 Gender: Female (N = 8) Sample Size = 8	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis Collection: Interviews (skype, facetime and in-person)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences Disclosure

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Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
20	Rothblum et al. (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18–53 (M = 30, SD = 11.5) Gender: Non-binary (N = 3), Male (N = 3) Female (N = 21) Sample Size = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Telephone Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Conservative Sexual Beliefs and Religion
21	Rothblum et al. (2020) Country: United States	Age: Range = 18–61 91.19% (18–27) Gender: Female (27.74%), Male (0%), Gender-queer, non-binary (72.26%) Sample Size = 19	Study Design: Quantitative Study Design Method of Analysis: bivariate differences assessed between asexual and non-asexual sexual minorities Collection: Online Questionnaire	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Disclosure
22	Savage (2019) Country = United States of America	Age: Range = 18–28 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 5	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative Analysis (guided by Muted Group Theory and the Minority Stress Model) Collection: Semi-structured Interviews (in-person and online)	Understanding Asexuality Coming to an Asexual Identity Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
23	Scherrer (2008) Country = United States	Age: Range = 18–66 (M = 27.4, Median = 21) Gender: Female (N = 75), Male (N = 18), Transgender (N = 2), “not easily categorised” (N = 7) Sample Size = 102	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Ethnography Collection: Online survey	Understanding the Asexual Self Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Individual Differences
24	Dawson et al. (2016) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = Majority 18–29, otherwise not specified Gender: Not specified Sample Size (Biographical Interview) = 50 Sample Size (two-week diaries) = 27	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematically analysed using software program NVivo10 Collection: Biographical interview; two-week diaries	Stigmatisation and the need to Educate Isolation and Invisibility Individual Differences
25	Jolene Sloan (2015) Country = United States	Age: Range = 19–34 Gender: Female (N = 10), Male (N = 2), Transgender Woman (N = 2), Transgender Man (N = 1) Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Qualitative, not specified Collection: Interviews (in-person or via online messaging)	Disclosure Negotiating Relationships
26	Van Houdenhove et al., (2015) Country = Belgium	Age: Range = 20–50 20–30 (N = 4), 31–40 (N = 3), 41–50 (N = 2) Gender: Female (N = 9) Sample Size = 9	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Collection: Semi-structured interviews	Understanding the Asexual Self Coming to an Asexual Identity Negotiating Relationships
27	Vares (2018) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18–60 Gender: Male and Female Participants (not specified) Sample Size = 13	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Discourse Analysis Collection: Interviews (in-person and over phone)	Negotiating Relationships Disclosure Isolation and Invisibility

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Table A1. (Continued).

No.	Author Information	Sample Information	Research Design	Relevant Themes
28	Vares (2021) Country = New Zealand	Age: Range = 18–60 Gender: Not Specified Sample Size = 15	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Open-ended Interview	Isolation and Invisibility Negotiating Relationships Stigmatisation and the need to Educate
29	Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2021) Country = United Kingdom	Age: Range = 18–35 (M = 22) Gender: Female (N = 33), Transwomen (N = 2), Male (N = 5), Transman (N = 3), Agender (N = 3), Gender-fluid (N = 2) Sample Size = 48	Study Design: Qualitative Study Design Method of Analysis: Thematic Analysis Collection: Online Survey	Negotiating Relationships