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The Ace Spectrum Label Debate: Examining the Benefits and Limitations of Naming Orientations

Scholars have raised significant critiques about the proliferation of identity labels within gender and sexuality studies. Jack Halberstam argues that the expansion of identity categories extends problematic Victorian and colonial traditions of classification that are rooted in scientific racism. At the same time, Judith Lorber contends that multiplying identity labels, though personally validating, may reinforce rather than challenge fundamental binaries. However, while raising valid concerns about categorization and power, these critiques fail to fully recognize how identity labels can serve as vital tools for recognition and community formation among marginalized groups. The asexual spectrum, colloquially called the “ace spectrum,” offers a compelling case study for examining how emerging identity labels can provide validation, understanding, and community for individuals whose experiences have historically lacked vocabulary for expression. Drawing on recent research showing that approximately 1% of the population identifies as asexual (Bogaert 279), along with evidence that ace spectrum individuals report distinct patterns in attraction, behavior, and identity (Copulsky and Hammack 223), I argue that the proliferation of ace spectrum labels serves three crucial functions: providing language for previously unnamed experiences, facilitating community formation and support, and advancing more nuanced understandings of the relationships between romantic and sexual attraction. Through analysis of discourse within online ace communities and engagement with

recent sociological research, this paper demonstrates how ace spectrum labels, rather than simply reinforcing binaries, create space for articulating experiences that challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and relationships.

Research on ace spectrum identities reveals several critical patterns in how identity labels function within these communities. Studies demonstrate that ace spectrum labels are crucial in personal identity development and community building. As Copulsky and Hammack found, individuals who identify as “asexual,” “graysexual,” and “demisexual” experience significant differences in how they engage with attraction, behavior, and identity (223). Their research indicates that these distinct labels help people articulate meaningful differences in their experiences. This specificity appears particularly important given that many ace individuals report feeling “broken” or abnormal before discovering terminology that validates their experiences (Petrow A.3).

The role of online communities has been especially significant in developing and disseminating ace spectrum labels. These spaces facilitate the discovery of ace spectrum identities and ongoing discussions about how different labels apply to varied experiences. As Doremus et al. note, individuals often work through complex questions about their identity through engagement with others who share similar experiences (1260). These findings suggest that examining discussions within online spaces may provide valuable insights into how people actively negotiate their relationship with ace spectrum labels.

Current research also focuses on the growing complexity of ace spectrum terminology. The ace community has developed increasingly nuanced language to describe different patterns of attraction and desire. For example, research shows meaningful distinctions between romantic and sexual attraction, with individuals potentially identifying with varying orientations in each

domain (Copulsky and Hammack 224). This has led to compound identity labels like “homoromantic asexual” or “panromantic demisexual” that attempt to capture these multilayered experiences.

However, this proliferation of increasingly specific labels raises questions about potential limitations or drawbacks. Some researchers suggest that particular identity categories may create pressure to fit within particular definitions or may not adequately capture the fluidity of some individuals’ experiences (Doremus et al. 1262). This tension between the desire for accurate description and the potential constraints of rigid categories remains an important area of investigation.

Studies further indicate that those who use ace spectrum labels face unique challenges within broader social contexts. These individuals can face dismissal or misunderstanding, with asexuality often being viewed as a “phase” rather than a legitimate orientation (Petrow A.3). However, research also shows that having established identity labels has helped the ace community advocate for recognition and challenge assumptions about universal sexual attraction. This social dimension appears particularly relevant when examining online community discussions, where individuals must navigate internal questions about their identity and external pressures around how they present and explain that identity to others. While existing scholarship has examined various aspects of ace spectrum labels, most studies focus on broader patterns rather than examining the detailed conversations happening in spaces where ace individuals actively work out their relationships to these labels. This gap is particularly notable given online communities’ central role in contemporary ace identity formation and discourse.

To examine how individuals engage with ace spectrum labels in practice, I conducted qualitative research through anonymous online engagement with members of ace communities

on Reddit. Reddit hosts active ace communities where individuals regularly discuss their experiences with identity labels, making it an ideal platform for investigating how people engage with, benefit from, and sometimes struggle with these identity labels in their daily lives. After receiving approval from community moderators, I posted in two subreddit forums (r/Asexual and r/demisexuality) requesting perspectives on experiences with ace spectrum identity labels. To protect participant privacy and comply with ethical research practices, I informed participants that their responses would be anonymized and that no usernames or direct links to posts would be included in the final paper. Participants were told they could withdraw their responses at any time. The quotes included in this analysis are presented without identifying information and with participant consent.

My research suggests that a crucial benefit of ace spectrum labels is having specific terminology to describe one's experiences. While critics like Halberstam caution against the proliferation of identity categories, many individuals within the ace community express that finding precise language for their experiences provides vital validation and self-understanding. As one Reddit user explains, "Even after discovering asexuality I spent years questioning if I was really asexual because of the fantasies I experienced. When I learnt [sic] about aegosexuality it was an enormous relief because it meant there was a community of people with the same experience as me."¹ This reflection illustrates how micro-labels within the ace spectrum can help individuals make sense of experiences that might otherwise seem to conflict with broader identity categories.

The development of nuanced terminology appears particularly significant given historical evidence that many ace individuals have felt "broken" or abnormal before discovering language to describe their experiences (Petrow A.3). The distinction between sexual and romantic

attraction, for instance, provides crucial vocabulary for articulating complex patterns of attraction. Another Reddit user notes, “The differentiation between aesthetic attraction, romantic attraction, sexual attraction, etc, helps me understand people and myself better.”² This parsing of different forms of attraction through specific terminology enables individuals to better understand and communicate their experiences.

Research supports this vital role of terminology; Copulsky and Hammack found that asexual, graysexual, and demisexual individuals demonstrate meaningfully distinct patterns in attraction, behavior, and identity (223). Rather than an unnecessary multiplication of labels, these distinctions reflect genuine variations in lived experience. One user artfully describes labels as “shortcuts to explain your experiences and how you live life. Not something to arrange your life around, but rather something to help explain what your true self already is.”³ This reflection illustrates how micro-labels within the ace spectrum can help individuals make sense of experiences that might otherwise seem to conflict with broader identity categories. The metaphor of labels as ‘shortcuts’ aptly captures both their utility as efficient tools for communication and their inherent limitation as simplified approximations of complex lived experiences.

The strategic deployment of these terms also facilitates more precise communication with those outside the community. “When speaking with people unfamiliar with demisexuality,” explains one Reddit participant, “I use ace/asexual and say something like, ‘I’m basically asexual until I form an emotional connection with someone.’”⁴ Such careful terminology navigation enables meaningful dialogue across different levels of familiarity with ace spectrum concepts.

Beyond individual identification, these labels serve a crucial community-building function. While Lorber cautions that multiplying identity labels may reinforce rather than challenge existing binaries, evidence from online ace communities suggests a more complex

picture. The development of specific terminology enables individuals to locate others with shared experiences. “Finding new micro labels,” one community member reflects, “lets us define our feelings and connect with groups of people who feel the same way.”⁵ This observation highlights how specific terminology serves not just an individual identificatory function. It also actively facilitates the formation of targeted support networks where people with similar experiences can find validation and understanding through shared language.

This community connection proves especially vital given the isolation many ace individuals experience before discovering their identity. With research indicating that approximately 1% of the population identifies as asexual (Bogaert 279), finding others with similar experiences in immediate social circles can be challenging. The emergence of online spaces organized around specific ace spectrum identities helps address this isolation, as evidenced by one participant’s relief: “It’s great to know I’m not alone - I felt ‘broken’ for many years living in a small town where I seemed to be the only one incapable of developing sexual attraction.”⁶ This participant’s experience illustrates how geographical isolation can compound feelings of difference and alienation, particularly in less populous areas where ace spectrum individuals may lack local models or communities - isolation that online spaces organized around specific identity labels help overcome.

The process of identity exploration unfolds organically within these digital spaces. Drawing on observations from Doremus et al., we see how individuals work through complex identity questions through dialogue with others sharing similar experiences (1260). This collaborative meaning-making emerges clearly in community discussions, where participants actively challenge the oversimplification of identity labels. One member asserts, “Language enables people to understand themselves and others, and I’m often suspicious of people who rail

against minority groups having specific language to differentiate between similar but distinct experiences.”⁷ This participant’s defense of specialized terminology highlights how access to precise language is fundamentally linked to social legitimacy - the ability to name and distinguish experiences becomes a crucial tool for achieving recognition and validation, particularly for marginalized groups whose experiences have historically been dismissed or conflated with dominant narratives.

These specialized community spaces serve another critical function: providing shelter from external pressures and misunderstandings. The necessity of such refuges becomes clear through community members’ testimonies. “If it were all under the same name with no option of forming own communities,” one participant explains, “then people who are repulsed will have to be in same space as people who love talking about sex or romance, and will be uncomfortable and have no safe spaces at all.”⁸ This observation highlights how specific labels enable targeted support communities that address distinct needs within the broader ace spectrum.

Ace spectrum labels contribute significantly to broader theoretical understandings of the relationship between romantic and sexual attraction. While traditional models often conflate romantic and sexual attraction, the terminology developed within ace communities helps articulate essential distinctions between these experiences. As one Reddit user notes, “It’s really difficult to figure out that you actually feel mirous and not true sexual attraction; not feeling the same things about sex as those around you but also not knowing if you are asexual makes it hard to fit into either community.”⁹ This reflection highlights how ace spectrum labels help capture nuances that more traditional sexual orientation categories may miss.

Empirical evidence reinforces the importance of these nuanced distinctions. Copulsky and Hammack’s research reveals distinctly different patterns of romantic and sexual attraction

across the ace spectrum (224), challenging conventional assumptions about how attraction operates. Consider one participant's reflection on their experience: "Being demiromantic, I've only been romantically attracted to one person in my life, but to him (my husband), I am extremely romantically attracted."¹⁰ Such precise articulation of experience, enabled by micro-labels, allows for recognizing complex attraction patterns that might otherwise go unnamed.

The development of this nuanced vocabulary has implications beyond the ace community itself. As Doremus et al. note, examining how ace individuals conceptualize and describe their experiences can enhance our broader understanding of how attraction operates (1260). For example, one Reddit user observes, "The depth at which we view and understand romantic attraction vs sexual attraction vs aesthetic attraction... that's why we need labels."¹¹ This careful parsing of different attraction forms contributes to more sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding human sexuality and relationships.

The value of these distinctions becomes particularly evident in challenging normative assumptions about relationships. As one Reddit user reflects, "Because different people experience demisexuality/asexuality differently, it sometimes feels like you've chosen the wrong label if you don't have the same level of 'ace-ness' as others."¹² This observation highlights the complexity of attraction patterns and the potential drawbacks of identity labels within the ace community. The participant's concern about "choosing the wrong label" suggests how identity categories, even when developed by marginalized communities themselves, can create new hierarchies of legitimacy. The very concept of having different "levels" of asexuality risks establishing implicit rankings of authenticity. At the same time, labels intended as descriptive tools can become prescriptive, creating pressure to conform to particular definitions. As

Doremus et al. note, identity categories may create pressure to fit within particular definitions or may not adequately capture the fluidity of some individuals' experiences (1262).

However, the ace community's open discussion of these tensions demonstrates a sophisticated approach to navigating these challenges. Rather than treating labels as rigid categories, community members often frame them as flexible tools for understanding diverse experiences. This nuanced approach aligns with Copulsky and Hammack's finding that individuals across the ace spectrum demonstrate meaningfully distinct patterns while maintaining significant variation within label categories (223). The community thus actively works to maintain labels' descriptive utility while resisting their potential to become prescriptive or hierarchical.

The proliferation of ace spectrum labels serves crucial functions in providing a language for unnamed experiences, facilitating community formation, and advancing understandings of attraction while reflecting the power and challenges of naming historically unrecognized experiences of attraction and relationships. As this analysis demonstrates, these labels provide vital language for self-understanding, community building, and advancing nuanced conceptualizations of attraction. However, as Lorber argues, the multiplication of identity labels, though personally validating, may reinforce rather than challenge fundamental binaries (297). This proliferation raises questions about the potential limitations of categorization, such as the risk of creating pressure to conform to narrow definitions or reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy. Ultimately, the case of ace spectrum labels suggests that the value of identity terminology lies in its ability to be dynamically negotiated and reimagined in service of individual and collective empowerment. As one Reddit user articulates, labels are "an easy shortcut to explain your experiences and how you live life. Not something to arrange your life

around, but rather something to help explain what your true self already is.”¹³ By approaching labels as provisional tools rather than prescriptive mandates, ace communities demonstrate the importance of cultivating a flexible, evolving language that can adapt to community members’ diverse needs and experiences. The ongoing debates within ace communities around labeling reflect the broader tensions and possibilities of identity politics in contemporary social justice movements. While Halberstam’s concerns about classification systems warrant consideration, analysis of online ace communities reveals how nuanced terminology remains essential for visible marginalized experiences. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of language in fully capturing the depth and diversity of human experience. As Doremus et al. note, individuals often work through complex questions about their identity through engagement with others who share similar experiences (1260). The use of ace spectrum labels must, therefore, be understood as an ongoing, iterative process that requires continuous reflection, critique, and reformulation in response to the evolving needs and insights of the community. By grappling with these tensions openly, ace communities offer valuable lessons for all those seeking to foster more expansive understandings of identity and social belonging. The ace spectrum label debate represents an invitation to reimagine the very terms on which we understand and navigate the vast spectrum of human possibility.

End Notes

1. Personal Communication with Participant 1, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
2. Personal Communication with Participant 2, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
3. Personal Communication with Participant 3, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
4. Personal Communication with Participant 4, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
5. Personal Communication with Participant 5, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
6. Personal Communication with Participant 6, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
7. Personal Communication with Participant 7, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
8. Personal Communication with Participant 8, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
9. Personal Communication with Participant 9, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
10. Personal Communication with Participant 10, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
11. Personal Communication with Participant 11, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
12. Personal Communication with Participant 12, Reddit, October 23, 2024.
13. Personal Communication with Participant 13, Reddit, October 23, 2024.

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