Introduction to Aromanticism and Related Concepts

Taylor Sandusky
WGSS 192: Senior Project
April 28, 2017

Romance is a staple of American society and saturates our media. We are taught that all humans desire romance and that romance itself is the ultimate achievement. Because of this, romantic relationships are valued over others, and people are expected to form long-lasting, committed romantic relationships. The pressure to find romance and the socially acceptable practice of ignoring others in favor of a significant other hurts individuals, families, and friendships. However, it is especially problematic for a growing number of people who identify as aromantic, or someone who does not experience romantic attraction. The aromantic community—for this paper, anyone who associates themselves with this group and especially those who post about their aromanticism online—has spent at least seven years[1] deconstructing dominant ideas about romance, but academia has taken little notice. This paper acts as an introduction to aromanticism and an argument for its inclusion in scholarly discussions. In it, I will address four main questions: What is aromanticism? What is romance? How do aromantics feel about and interact with our romance-obsessed society? And finally, how can aromanticism be used to deconstruct romance, challenge heteronormativity, and rethink current theories about love, attraction, and the necessity of romance?

I begin with an introduction to the social construction of romance and the split attraction model, including asexuality. In the next section, I consider the problems with popular definitions

---

1. Cakeatthefortress, "A Mystery that is the A-Romantic Community History." Cakeatthefortress believes the word "aromantic" first appeared in the asexual community around 2004. The aromantic community did not become its own group until 2010, when the National Coalition for Aromantic Visibility (no longer available online) was formed. I was not part of the early formation of this community, and so I do not know exactly when the conversations I am addressing became popular in the aromantic community. It seems likely that people would have asked the same questions I am asking now in the six years between the first use of the word and the initial separation from asexuality. In any case, by the time the aromantic community became its own entity in 2010, it is highly likely that these sorts of conversations were taking place.

of aromanticism and romantic attraction. The rest of the paper discusses responses to my survey on aromanticism and romance in American television. I conclude by considering aromanticism's radical potential.

The Social Construction of Love and Romance

Love and romance are social constructs. Maryan Wherry provides an introduction to the way romance controls behavior and the role it plays in American culture.[2] According to Wherry, romantic love is a learned behavior, and there are rules that define what is acceptable romantic love. When done right, romantic love promises happiness and success. Wherry notes that much of American media replicates the idea that romance is happiness, but the significance of this is lost on many because they are so accustomed to seeing romance portrayed a certain way. In this way, love and romance "dominate and permeate"[3] American culture. Anne E. Beall and Robert J. Sternberg support Wherry's conclusions by arguing love is a socially constructed emotional experience.[4] The way a culture perceives love affects how individuals in that culture experience love and controls what actions are allowed and expected in different types of relationships.

Beall and Sternberg use historical constructions of love as evidence of the social construction of love; Susan S. Hendrick and Clyde Hendrick do the same.[5] Beall and Sternberg note three different beliefs seen throughout Western history: that love includes sex, that love is separate from sex, and that love is an important component of marriage. Hendrick and Hendrick

---

2. Wherry, "Introduction."

3. Ibid., 4.

4. Beall and Sternberg, "The Social Construction of Love."

5. Hendrick and Hendrick. *Romantic Love*.

provide a quick introduction to four different constructions of love—including the current Western construction, which closely ties love, sex, and marriage together. Hendrick and Hendrick begin by discussing courtly love, which originated in the twelfth century. Irving Singer explores this in more depth.[6] According to Singer, courtly love—which was not the only construction of love at the time—"affirms that love between human beings is in itself authentic and magnificent. It is love based on natural inclinations, such as sexual desire, and yet directed toward highly moral and aesthetic values."[7] Elements of the modern Western construction of love can be seen in courtly love; Singer describes the way courtly love believed the most successful marriages were based on reciprocated attraction and the ability of a husband and wife to get along. He also describes courtly love as a way to "[harmonize] sexual impulses with idealistic motives…justifying amorous intimacy…as an end in itself that made life worth living;"[8] this led to later constructions of love, including our own.

Singer as well as Hendrick and Hendrick continue their exploration of love's history by examining the Romantic Era, which began at the end of the eighteenth century. Singer says Romanticism built on the construction of courtly love; it took aspects of previous love constructs and updated them. Hendrick and Hendrick provide a quick introduction to the history of Romantic love, saying Romanticism focused on what love feels like and emphasized the powerful connection between men and women in love. According to Singer, Romantic writers expressed sexual desire in more detail than writers before them. Like past constructions,

---

6. Singer, *The Nature of Love*.

7. Ibid., 29.

8. Ibid., 36.

Romanticism supported marriage, but a larger focus was placed on marrying for love. In the Romantic Era, merging was "often named as the sole defining attribute of an authentic love between man and woman,"[9] where before it was less important. Merging is the idea that lovers become one, but have also always been one; there is "a common element, an identity that defines the nature of both participants equally well."[10] During this time, people believed that merging also merged individuals with "the totality of everything;"[11] in this way, love brought individuals closer to God.

Hendrick and Hendrick briefly touch on Victorian Era constructions of love. However, Steven Seidman provides a more detailed analysis.[12] Seidman argues Victorians believed true love was a spiritual union between two people. Sex, while a required part of marriage, was not a defining part of love. Seidman cites a survey of women from the late 1800s and early 1900s; according to the survey, women before 1900 believed sex was for reproduction, while women after 1900 saw sex as a sign of love. The historical evidence provided by Beall and Sternberg, Hendrick and Hendrick, Singer, and Seidman supports the argument that love changes across time and cultures and is therefore socially constructed.

The aromantic community has also discussed the social construction of love and romance in detail. Kaz and The Thinking Asexual, two aromantic bloggers, both attempt to define

---

9. Ibid., 6.

10. Ibid., 5.

11. Ibid., 291.

12. Seidman, "The Power of Desire."

"romantic." Kaz writes "it's romance if you think it's romance"[13] and that there are aspects of romance—"sexual interest, exclusivity, primary relationship, crush, specific types of strong emotional connection, desire for approval, etc."[14]—but all of those aspects can be found outside of romantic relationships and none of them are present in every single romantic relationship. The Thinking Asexual takes a similar stance, stating "the only thing that defines romantic relationships as romantic is romantic attraction… and romantic attraction is a completely subjective feeling that varies by person."[15] They argue nothing is inherently romantic except for romantic attraction and that all of the behaviors society views as romantic can also be found in non-romantic contexts.

Kaz and The Thinking Asexual's work also explore what Irrationalpoint calls "The Relationship Hierarchy:"

> [B]lood ties and marriage ties trump other sorts of ties. Sexual relationships trump non sexual relationships. You have only one partner, who shall be your sexual partner and your lawfully-wedded spouse, and no other partners, and they trump all other relationships. Marriages that produce children trump non-procreating relationships, but Thou Shalt Not Be A Single Parent. "Family" and "Friends" are distinctive sets of people, and "Family" trumps "Friends."[16]

American society ascribes different values to different types of relationships and views romantic relationships as somehow superior to all others.

---

13. Kaz, "A/romanticism."

14. Ibid.

15. The Thinking Asexual, "Amatonormativity, Romance, and Partnership."

16. Kaz quotes Irrationalpoint in "A/romanticism," but the original post is no longer available.

Kaz and Irrationalpoint wrote before the 2012 publication of Elizabeth Brake's book and her use of the term "amatonormativity,"[17] which has informed many of the aromantic community's discussions about the construction of romance and the relationship hierarchy. Amatonormativity describes "the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types."[18] An amatonormative society "prompts the sacrifice of other relationships to romantic love and marriage and relegates friendship and solitudinousness to cultural invisibility."[19]

Kaz describes their frustration with amatonormativity without using the term; they dislike having to categorize their relationships as either romantic or non-romantic—as either something that feels incorrect or something society views as less valuable. When people say they are just friends, they devalue friendship; Kaz argues "that friendship doesn't have to be 'just', and that there are more options than friendship or romance."[20] The Thinking Asexual directly connects their ideas to amatonormativity, arguing against "internalized amatonormativity and romance supremacy"[21] in the aromantic community. According to The Thinking Asexual, amatonormativity can only exist as long as aromanticism is invisible; interrogating romance and

---

17. Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*.

18. Ibid., 88-89.

19. Ibid., 89.

20. Kaz, "A/romanticism."

21. The Thinking Asexual, "Amatonormativity, Romance, and Partnership."

exploring aromanticism will destabilize amatonormativity. This is similar to arguments made by scholars exploring asexuality. (See the asexuality section below.)

Amatonormativity assumes romantic attraction is universal, but aromantics, or "aros," do not, or only occasionally, experience romantic attraction. In this way, aromanticism is the ultimate challenge to amatonormativity; it requires us to rethink the entire concept of romance. If there are people who do not experience romantic attraction, then romantic attraction cannot be universal. If love, affection, lifelong partnership, sex, intimacy, touch, support, etc can be found outside of romantic relationships, then those things cannot define romance. While Brake and amatonormativity are just one example of the way the aromantic community engages with and expands upon scholarly work, they are a key part of aromantic discussion about romance, attraction, and social constructions. A minority of survey participants discussed topics like these with ease, and one mentioned Brake directly.

The results of my survey echo scholarly and community discussions in other ways as well. When asked to define "romantic attraction" and "romance," participants in my survey listed examples of behaviors associated with romance like cuddling, holding hands, kissing, sharing a bed, and hugging. Dominant American society assumes these actions are romantic; in doing so, it assumes some types of affection can only be found in romantic relationships. However, all of these occur outside of a romantic context. Friends cuddle. Parents hold their children's hands. People kiss without romantic intentions. Siblings share beds. Family and friends hug. Additionally, one survey participant said,

> I believe a major problem in defining romantic orientation is the idea that there is a platonic/romantic binary, that those are the only two options people have. I have a very close and beloved friend that I sometimes imagine spending

> the rest of my life with, but I wouldn't qualify these feelings as strictly romantic nor strictly platonic and I think a lot of discussions about orientations and attractions suffer from the lack of nuanced terminology specifically for platonic and romantic feelings, or a mixture thereof.

There is no solid, unmoving line between romantic and platonic; they make up a spectrum. The relationship hierarchy and amatonormativity force platonic and romantic into two discrete categories and create the illusion that romance is the only source of certain interactions in order to construct romantic relationships as superior.

The Split Attraction Model

In order to differentiate between aromanticism and asexuality (not feeling sexual attraction), the aromantic and asexual communities created the split attraction model. This model primarily focuses on sexual and romantic attraction, although there are discussions surrounding other types of attraction as well. For example, Anagnori lists platonic, aesthetic, and sensual attraction in their glossary.[22] The split attraction model lets asexuals and aromantics better define their experiences. While it is also used by non-asexuals and non-aromantics, there is a heated debate online—as seen in posts by bloggers like Lezgem[23] and Socialjusticeorwhatever[24]—about the potential problems that come from constructing sexualities as only sexual. However, as Socialjusticeorwhatever notes, the split attraction model was created by asexuals and aromantics to better understand their experiences, and so it is noteworthy despite its shortcomings. For many

---

22. Anagnori, "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities." While asexuality and aromanticism are distinct, the two communities are very connected. Anagnori chose to include only asexuality in the title of this post, but "include[s] words from aromantic discourse because of the overlap between the two communities."

23. Lezgem, discussion of split attraction model and homophobia.

24. Socialjusticeorwhatever, discussion of split attraction model's origins.

people, sexual attraction and romantic attraction are aligned; this is less common for asexuals and aromantics. Some asexuals are aromantic, but there are asexuals who experience romantic attraction and aromantics who experience sexual attraction. The split attraction model is used to capture these different experiences.

Lisa M. Diamond's work provides biological support for the split attraction model.[25] According to Diamond, sexual attraction evolved for reproduction while romantic love originated from a pair-bonding system designed to keep individuals together long enough to protect and raise a child. Because these evolved for different reasons, humans are capable of falling in love without experiencing sexual desire or experiencing sexual desire without falling in love. Interestingly, Diamond believes romantic love is not oriented toward any gender—meaning anyone can fall in love with anyone at anytime. This slightly contradicts the split attraction model, which describes both sexual and romantic attraction as oriented toward specific genders. While American society currently associates romance with sex, Diamond believes romantic love and sexual desire are two unique concepts.

Before exploring sexual and romantic attraction in more detail, I would like to briefly address platonic, aesthetic, and sensual attraction to show the split attraction model's complexity. Platonic attraction is the "[d]esire for friendship or another close non-romantic relationship with someone."[26] A platonic crush is known as a "squish." Aesthetic attraction refers to the desire to look at someone because you like their appearance, which may or may not be associated with sexual or romantic attraction; admiring someone beautiful without wanting to sleep with or date

---

25. Diamond, "What Does Sexual Orientation Orient?"

26. Anagnori, "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities."

them is aesthetic attraction. Sensual attraction is a desire for physical touch and closeness; like aesthetic attraction, sensual attraction can also exist without a sexual or romantic component.[27]

The major significance of the split attraction model is its ability to separate romantic and sexual attraction. According to the asexual and aromantic communities, sexual attraction is the desire to do sexual acts with someone. Being able to distinguish between these two types of attraction is key because, while some people experience sexual and romantic attraction in a way that makes them seem identical, others do not. Sexual attraction is conflated with romantic attraction, but they are not necessarily the same thing. Additionally, sex is not romance, and romance is not sex. This distinction is important to remember.[28]

Asexuality

Asexuality is a broad spectrum that includes those who do not experience sexual attraction, those who do not experience sexual desire, those who do not care about sex, those who are repulsed[29] by sex, and those who only feel occasional sexual attraction or desire. This is by no means a comprehensive definition as asexual experiences are incredibly diverse. There are many identities within the asexual spectrum; Anagnori[30] and Arospecawarenessweek[31] both list

---

27. This is common knowledge within the aromantic and asexual communities. For further explanations, see Anagnori's "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities" or Arospecawarenessweek's "Glossary of Terms."

28. Mosbergen, "The Asexual Spectrum: Identities In The Ace Community;" Ruebird, discussing the separation between romantic and sexual attraction. Again, this is common knowledge in the asexual and aromantic communities.

29. Sex repulsed and romance repulsed are common terms in the asexual and aromantic communities; Arospecawarenessweek discusses both of these in "Glossary of Terms."

30. Anagnori, "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities."

31. Arospecawarenessweek, "Glossary of Terms."

some of these. As an example, demisexuals are those who only feel sexual attraction after forming a strong emotional bond with another person. Asexuality, like aromanticism, is an umbrella term as well as an identity. It is also important to note that asexuals, or "aces," may or may not have sex and may or may not experience arousal, which they may or may not act on. Because asexuality is such a large umbrella term and people have various reasons to have sex, identifying as asexual does not imply anything about someone's level of sexual activity.

Despite their differences, asexuality and aromanticism have much in common, meaning theoretical arguments about asexuality can be applied to aromanticism with only a few adjustments. CJ DeLuzio Chasin[32] and Mark Carrigan, Kristina Gupta, and Todd G. Morrison[33] all note that current definitions of asexuality imply experiencing sexual attraction is the default. They believe asexuality has the potential to challenge dominant ideas about sexuality and reshape the way we think about sexual attraction. Carrigan, Gupta, and Morrison stress how important it is for those studying and discussing asexuality to consider the implications of their work to ensure they do not accidentally support the constructs and social systems they are trying to destabilize. They wonder if asexuality should be used to start "a critical re-examination of the conceptual framework within which human sexuality is studied."[34] Chasin believes asexuality can and should challenge the entire concept of sexuality, but warns against creating essentialist definitions. Defining "asexuality" as "a relatively stable and typically lifelong trait"[35] that people

---

32. Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential."

33. Carrigan, Gupta, and Morrison, "Asexuality Special Theme Issue Editorial."

34. Ibid., 117.

35. Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential," 409.

are born with does nothing to challenge our hypersexual culture or force people to rethink human sexuality. This definition says asexuality is not a choice, that poor asexuals are unable to become sexual, but would if we could. Essentialist definitions are counterproductive; they assume sexuality is the norm and construct asexuals as outliers. Careful, thoughtful definitions of asexuality can help us challenge heteronormativity and dominant ideas about human sexuality. Chasin and Carrigan, Gupta, and Morrison's points easily carry over to a discussion of aromanticism as aromanticism, if defined properly, also has the potential to challenge dominant ideas.

Beginning to Define Aromanticism, Romance, and Romantic Attraction

Academic discussion about aromanticism is virtually nonexistent. Scholarly work on asexuality often mentions aromanticism in a few sentences to show the diversity of experiences in the asexual community, but this is far from the amount of attention aromanticism deserves. In summarizing past work on asexuality, Carrigan, Gupta, and Morrison indirectly refer to aromanticism in their discussion of K. S. Scherrer's work,[36] writing "some of her respondents were not interested in forming romantic relationships."[37] Chasin uses the word "aromantic," but only to say that aromantics exist, do not experience romantic attraction, and produce "unique subcultural products"[38] like memes—not exactly a detailed analysis. Asexuality itself is a relatively new topic in academia, and the work being done by these scholars is vitally important, but aromanticism is more than a footnote to asexuality.

---

36. Scherrer, "What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion."

37. Carrigan, Gupta, and Morrison, "Asexuality Special Theme Issue Editorial," 112.

38. Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential," 407.

A vast majority of the work on aromanticism takes place in and is aimed at the aromantic community, but there are a few exceptions. For example, Julie Sondra Decker's book contains the longest discussion of aromanticism I have seen outside the online community.[39] The section on aromanticism is simple and meant to provide a basic introduction to those unfamiliar with either asexuality or aromanticism, but it is noteworthy all the same as Decker clearly defines terms and concepts. To Decker, romance is signified when individuals "cross a certain threshold of intimacy and access to each other's lives."[40] This explanation, like the rest of Decker's piece on aromanticism, is a helpful starting point, but lacks nuance. Like the scholars above, Decker focuses on asexuality.

The aromantic community has produced many posts acting as an introduction to aromanticism and related ideas. Anagnori and Arospecawarenessweek both created glossaries by and for the aromantic community.[41] The variety and changing nature of the identities and concepts found on these pages hint at the more in-depth conversations happening in the community. Arospecawarenessweek also provides a more detailed and personal introduction that summarizes the basic idea of aromanticism and addresses the broken feeling experienced by many aromantics before they find community.[42] When I was questioning my romantic orientation, Anagnori's "You Might Be Aromantic If…"[43] was the most helpful resource I found

---

39. Decker, "Romantic Orientation."

40. Ibid.

41. Anagnori, "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities;" Arospecawarenessweek, "Glossary of Terms."

42. Arospecawarenessweek, "Frequently Asked Questions."

43. Anagnori, "You Might Be Aromantic If…"

because it lists tangible feelings and experiences common to aromantics; "[y]ou're not sure if you've ever had a crush on someone or fallen in love"[44] is much easier to relate to than a glossary definition of aromantic—"[a] person who does not experience romantic attraction."[45] "You Might Be Aromantic If…" provides concrete examples instead of forcing the reader to understand romantic attraction in the first place and recognize whether or not they experience it.

The most common definition of aromanticism relies on the concept of romantic attraction, but attempts to define romantic attraction easily lead into circular thinking. The community is aware of this problem and is working toward solidifying these relatively new concepts and terms. Anagnori defines "romantic attraction" as "[a] feeling of attraction, desire or strong interest" which "often takes the form of crushes, infatuation or falling in love."[46] Arospecawarenessweek defines it as "romantic feelings or desires toward someone" and "wishing to do romantic activities with them."[47] However, if romantic attraction is "romantic feelings" or "wishing to do romantic activities," then what makes something romantic? According to The Thinking Asexual, the only thing that makes something romantic is romantic attraction. If this is true, then romantic attraction is defined by romance which is defined by romantic attraction. When I attempt to define romantic attraction, I find myself resorting to popular romantic tropes: romantic attraction is long walks on the beach, watching the sunset, kissing in the rain, listening to a love song and thinking about someone specific, butterflies,

---

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., "Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities."

46. Ibid.

47. Arospecawarenessweek, "Glossary of Terms."

flowers, dating, marriage, holding hands, staying up all night talking, knowing somebody, needing somebody. None of these definitions are particularly helpful as these activities, feelings, and ideas do not necessarily indicate romantic attraction.

Arospecawarenessweek says the aromantic community is "a community of people who largely do not understand romantic attraction so [it] is the worst place to turn to for a sound definition."[48] This brings up one of the problems with simple definitions of aromanticism: How does someone realize they do not experience something when they do not know what they are not experiencing? At the same time, aromantics must have some idea of what romantic attraction is—how else would we define ourselves against it? My own, personal definition of "romantic attraction" is fuzzy; it is a feeling that I have only heard vague or poetic descriptions of—something I cannot quite conceptualize. However, when I say I am not romantically attracted to any gender, I mean something specific. I do not want to date anyone or hold hands or cuddle or share a house or get married or do other stereotypically romantic things; I have never had a crush. These examples suggest aromanticism signals a disinterest in things associated with romance, but of course my experience does not represent that of all aromantics. What do other aromantics imagine when they say they do not experience romantic attraction? What unites us all under this umbrella identity? What is romantic attraction? What is romance? Most importantly, what is aromanticism?

Methodology

In the spring of 2017 I created and administered a survey which explored identity formation and amatonormative cultural engagement among adult aromantics. I sent my survey to

---

48. Ibid., "Frequently Asked Questions."

five aromantic Tumblr blogs and asked them to spread the word. To my knowledge, Aroadventures[49] was the only one to post my survey. I also included a link to the survey on the Mills College student news forum. Concepts in the survey included how aromatics form an aromantic identity, how they define romantic attraction and romance, and how comfortable they are with romance in various situations. The situations explored are as follows: when others demonstrate romantic feelings toward the participant, when other people discuss romance in their own lives around the participant, and when romance appears in television. I chose to focus on television because of its cultural impact and wide audience. Popular television shows permeate American culture in a way other types of media do not, and the television format lets creators dedicate large amounts of time to romance. My final question asked participants if they had anything else they wanted to share; answers to this question are spread throughout the rest of this paper as many participants used this space to elaborate on other questions.

In terms of demographics, I asked for participants' gender, race, and age. The age question was multiple choice—with options for 18-24, 25-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and 60+—but all others were open ended. Ninety-six people responded to the survey. All of them provided an answer for my questions on gender and age. Three people did not indicate their race. In terms of gender, 46% of participants are women,[50] 18% are agender, 9% are men,[51] 7% are non binary, 5% are demigirls, 3% are genderqueer, 2% are genderfluid, 2% are androgyne, and 2% are not sure. An additional 5% is made up of five unique identities, which can be found in Appendix A.

---

49. aroadventures.tumblr.com.

50. Two participants identified as cis female, but the other forty-two made no distinction.

51. In this case, six participants identified as trans men, and three did not make a distinction.

As noted above, three people did not provide their race. Of the remaining ninety-three, 81% are white, 5% are mixed race, 2% are South Asian, 2% are Mexican, and 2% are Chinese. Some people's responses did not match up with any others; this final 6% can be found in Appendix B. Finally, 72% of participants are between eighteen and twenty-four years old, 15% between twenty-five and thirty, 10% between thirty-one and forty, 1% between fifty-one and sixty, and 2% sixty or older. No participants are between forty-one and fifty. A pie chart of this information can be found in Appendix C.

The high percentage of women and white people is notable because, if aromanticism is primarily adopted by white women, its existence could illuminate aspects of the social construction of gender and race. For example, people of color have been and still are dehumanized through either hypersexualization or desexualization. Thingsthatmakeyouacey's discusses the intersection of race, asexuality, and gender[52] and says,

> When I say it's difficult for me to say I'm asexual, I really do mean, it is viscerally horrible to consider myself asexual. It is violent…
>
> Asexuality is what they want. It is what the soldiers, and the masters, and the foreign governments want. *They want us to lack something they deem human so they don't have to empathize.* They want us to not desire because it gives them sick satisfaction. They want us not to feel because then they can justify crimes against us in our own courts.[53]

Aromanticism can be used to dehumanize as well. The higher percentage of women might be explained by the different social expectations for men and women; women are socialized to focus on romance—to find a man and settle down—while men are less pressured to form romantic relationships. All of this is speculation, however. It is possible my survey circulated

---

52. Thingsthatmakeyouacey, discussing race and asexuality.

53. Ibid. "Asexuality as a White Supremacist Dream." (Emphasis mine.)

through a section of the aromantic community that contains more women and white people than the community as a whole, and so the aromantic community may or may not be predominantly white and female. More research is needed.

Aromantic asexuals make up 49% of respondents. Aromantic pansexuals make up 7%, while aromantic bisexuals make up an additional 5%. Demiromantic asexuals, aromantic heterosexuals, greyromantic asexuals, aroflux asexuals, greyromantic bisexuals, and aromantics who are either unsure of their sexual orientation or did not provide one each make up 3%. 2% of my participants are currently questioning both their sexual and romantic orientations. The final 17% includes seventeen unique identities, which can be found in Appendix D.

Forming an Aromantic Identity

I received ninety-five responses to my open-ended question on when and how people realized they are aromantic. Not everyone said when they began to identify with aromanticism, but I received a variety of answers from those that did. Some people provided a particular year, others answered with a life event like high school, and a final group answered with the amount of time that has passed since their realization. Similarly, not everyone explained how they came to identify on the aromantic spectrum, although many who provided an answer went into some detail. The common threads in these responses reveal key aromantic experiences and can be used to create a more helpful definition of aromanticism.

Forty-two people gave their age in response to the first half of my question. Two-thirds of these people were teenagers when they first identified with aromanticism; one first identified with aromanticism when they were thirteen. Two people were unclear on whether they were in their late teens or early twenties. Nine people formed their aromantic identity in their twenties,

and three individuals did so in their thirties. Someone between fifty-one and sixty years old formed their aromantic identity within the last few years, and someone over sixty did so within the past few months.

Thirty-two people responded with either a year or something like "a few years ago." Of these, twenty-nine formed their identity within the last few years, and sixteen people first identified as aromantic within the past year. One person said five years ago, another said eight, and a final participant said they first identified as aromantic about ten years ago. Seven participants only began to identify as aromantic within the past few months. I cannot say if there was a certain year when aromanticism became more common as so many answered this question with their age and I only have a general idea of how old each person is. Based on the years provided by the thirty-two participants described above, it seems likely that more people have begun to identify with aromanticism in the past few years. This makes sense because aromanticism is relatively new and becoming more visible—giving more people the opportunity to identify as aro—but more research is needed to challenge or confirm this speculation.

Many participants[54] described how they felt before discovering aromanticism as an identity. Five thought everyone else exaggerated their romantic feelings. Seven individuals discussed the importance of having a word to describe something already known. As one participant said, "I've always been aromantic, but I never knew there was a word for it…or that

---

54. It is hard to decide on an exact number as some people explicitly stated how they felt before learning about aromanticism, others seemed to imply that they experienced certain feelings before finding aromanticism, and others noted that they felt a certain way before discovering aromanticism but did not go into detail. I can comfortably say that at least fifteen participants provided some sort of description of how they felt before learning about aromanticism.

other people felt this way." While this enters the essentialist territory Chasin warns against, it also exemplifies the value of the word "aromantic" to aromantic individuals and hints at another key theme: difference. Six participants felt "broken" and "distressed" before finding the aromantic community; they felt uniquely different from other people who identify with romance. One participant reported feeling like they were "missing something" and thought of themself as "'defective,' 'straight by default,' or 'nothing.'"

Amatonormativity creates an environment that alienates aromantics in this way, and two individuals explicitly blamed societal pressure for the length of time it took them to form an aromantic identity. As one participant said,

> Society just pushes this amatonormative view so hard that the idea that not being romantically attracted to people was even possible didn't occur to me. At first it's just this thought of oh, I haven't fallen in love yet. But I guess I will because you have to, right? And then I kept not falling in love to the point that I wondered what was wrong with me and if I was broken. Not until I saw other people in the aro community express similar feelings did I realize that oh, this is a thing that humans can be.

This quote summarizes many major themes found in the survey responses. Before learning about aromanticism, many aromantics, myself included, assumed we would fall in love eventually.[55] The opposite is not even an option. In response to the final question, five emphasized the importance of accurately representing aromantics in the media; this type of representation would present nonromantic relationship options and make it easier for aromantics to learn about themselves as "it's hard to identify as something that you don't realize exists." Another participant used the final question to say societal pressure made it hard for them "to determine

---

55. Anagnori briefly explores this while discussing how they realized they were aromantic in their post from October 10. Additionally, three participants in the survey mentioned this directly.

what [their] true feelings are." As discussed above, some aromantics feel broken for not feeling what everyone else is supposedly feeling. Finally, the discovery of aromanticism frequently leads to an "oh" moment. As a different participant said, it just clicks. Knowing aromanticism exists and is something many other people identify with can be a relief: "I was [not] stupid or missing out on some core part of being human…there were plenty of others who felt (or didn't feel) in ways similar to me…I no longer felt deficient." The word "aromantic" legitimizes the feelings and experiences of aromantics.

Six people very clearly stated a feeling of happiness or relief after discovering aromanticism; one person wrote, "I had finally found myself." However, another participant said "it felt awful to realize" they were aromantic. They "doubted [their] humanity/personhood" and had planned their future around some assumed significant other; when they realized they were aromantic, it was like "the carpet just got pulled out from underneath [them]." Additionally, not all participants described feeling broken before learning about aromanticism. Whether or not they did experience these feelings but did not want to share is unknown. However, I personally never felt broken, most likely because I knew about aromanticism for years before finally making the connection between aromanticism and my experiences.

Thirty-one participants explained how they first learned about aromanticism, and only three of these people made it clear that they first learned the term from people outside of the internet. Two individuals said they learned about aromanticism through the autistic community.[56] Fourteen people mentioned Tumblr directly, and four people said they discovered aromanticism

---

56. Conflating aromanticism and autism is problematic, but so is ignoring the existence of autistic aromantics. The intersection of these two identities is another area that deserves more attention.

on blogs. Three people said they discovered aromanticism through the internet, one person said they used Google, and one person said they found aromanticism through social media. The remaining five participants did not provide enough information to know if they learned about aromanticism online or offline; three people said they found the term through unspecified research, and two said they discovered the term through asexuality.

Eleven participants learned about aromanticism only after looking into other queer identities, and four mentioned identifying with aromanticism only after doing the same with asexuality. While others' reasons for doing so are unknown, I know I identified as asexual before aromantic because I could accept not feeling sexual attraction, but the idea of not feeling romantic attraction was too overwhelming—another excellent example of amatonormativity at work.

Participants realized they are aromantic in a variety of ways. Sixteen participants made the connection after being in a romantic relationship. While dating, three people realized they were unable to return their partner's feelings, two people felt uncomfortable, and one person felt "wrong and weird." Thirteen people said they dislike romance, and four described being repulsed by romance, "despising every instance of romantic affection." As an example, one participant said they were "physically sick" after being asked out. Other participants were not affected as strongly. One participant said emotional abuse "helped solidify [their] aromanticism," and another said their aromanticism stems from a personality disorder.[57]

---

57. Both of these are valid reasons to form an aromantic identity, but neither should be associated with all aromantics. Clearly not all aromantics identify with these, but some do; additionally, emotional abuse and personality disorders do not automatically make someone aromantic. The intersection of aromanticism, emotional abuse, and/or personality disorders needs to be studied further.

Crushes were another common topic. Ten participants said they have never had a crush, three did not understand the importance other people placed on crushes, and two said they have infrequent crushes. Two said they faked crushes when asked, describing celebrities they liked but had no interest in dating. In response to the final question, one participant said they "taught [themself] how to create crushes at a young age because everyone had crushes and [they] thought that was what was expected of [them]." Another participant said,

> [A]t times, my admiration for certain celebrities could still be considered a "crush." I know if I had a crush with someone I actually interacted with, it would be considered a romantic notion. However, my "love" for actors or athletes can never be reciprocated in the real world, so it's almost as if it is my safe space to feel a bit of romantic feeling. I guess I do the same with characters in shows occasionally as well.

This parallels what Anthony Bogaert named "autochorissexualism," or a disconnect between an individual and a sexual target.[58] Bogaert explains further, saying "asexual people's fantasies often do not involve their own identities. Also, when their fantasies involve people, these individuals are unknown to the asexual person or are fictional characters; in both cases, these individuals are not directly connected to the asexual person's real-life identity."[59] This is yet another area that deserves more academic exploration.

Responses to romance varied as well. Seven said they are confused by romance in general. Two people stressed they would much rather have a platonic relationship than a romantic one, and five wrote they have no desire for a romantic relationship. Four people said they are not interested in romance. However, one person wrote that they desire romance, and another said they "think [they] want romance, and quite badly" in response to my final question.

---

58. Bogaert, "Asexuality and Autochorissexualism."

59. Ibid., 1514.

Twelve people wrote that they do not experience romantic attraction. Associating aromanticism with a lack of romantic attraction is helpful to an extent, but I hope to expand this definition. However, because aromanticism encompasses so much, I am wary of declaring a definition, especially given the dearth of academic research on the subject. The following, then, is an incomplete list of things aromanticism can be, based only on my survey responses. Aromanticism is an umbrella term that can be defined by a lack of romantic attraction, a disinterest in romance, romance repulsion, discomfort with romance, a lack of infatuation, confusion about romance, infrequent romantic attraction, or any combination of the experiences described above.

Defining Romantic Attraction

When asked to define "romantic attraction," twenty-eight people indicated some sort of uncertainty through either extensive use of question marks ("A different kind of love???") or direct statements ("Buddy, I don't even know."). This type of response was the most common—perhaps because, as one participant put it, "it's like trying to define something you can't see or touch, by looking at how other people act when they're acting in ways that make no sense." Despite this general confusion, I received ninety-two answers to this open-ended question. As I suspected, aromantics have some idea of what romantic attraction is, as this is what we currently define ourselves against. These responses construct a broad definition of romantic attraction.

Twenty-six people defined "romantic attraction" as wanting romantic gestures from someone, and twenty-five said romantic attraction is wanting a romantic relationship with someone; these two groups overlap as seven people mentioned wanting romantic gestures *and* romantic relationships. Participants provided examples of romantic gestures: "cuddling,"

"hugging," "kissing," "holding hands," "staring into each other's eyes," "going on dates," and "giving gifts like flowers." These answers match the definition provided by blogs like Anagnori and Arospecawarenessweek and lead to the same questions: What makes gestures and relationships romantic? Romantic attraction. What defines romantic attraction? Wanting romantic gestures, and so on. Five participants noted the social construction of romance; one said romantic attraction is "[a]n attraction to someone that elicits a desire to seek and express intimacy with that someone according to culturally constructed conventions of romantic love." Another participant combined social constructions with individual preference, saying romantic attraction is the "[d]esire for interactions with another person that are understood and accepted as characterizing a romantic relationship, whether by your culture in general, or you specifically as an individual reflecting on your own interpersonal style."

Thirteen people said romantic attraction and relationships are "something more" than other types of attraction and relationships. Romantic attraction was described as more sensual and intense than friendship, and six made a point to separate it from sexual attraction and desire. One person said romantic relationships have a certain "specialness" that platonic ones do not; another said romantic attraction is "on a different level." At the same time, six participants separated romantic attraction and relationships from other types but did not assign more value to one or the other; one called it "a different kind of love." Two participants had trouble distinguishing romantic attraction from friendship, defining it as similar to friendship. One participant brought up "queerplatonic relationships," or those that blur the line between platonic and romantic, but are not romantic.

People used a variety of other words and concepts to define romantic attraction. One participant described it as “that undeniable pull toward someone in a way that sometimes even defies reason.” Nine people connected romantic attraction to romantic love or falling in love, nine noted the importance of physical affection, six brought up intimacy, four described some sort of closeness between individuals, four believe an emotional connection is important, and two listed emotional support as a key component. Six people believe wanting to be around someone—two participants specified that this want should be for an extended period of time—was one indication of romantic attraction. Seven connected romantic attraction to exclusivity, two brought up marriage, and one said wanting to share your life with someone else is an indication of romantic attraction. Four people mentioned crushes. Other answers include “preoccupation” with someone (indicated by four participants), happiness (three), passion (two), knowing someone (two), longing (one), care (one), and “a warm feeling inside your heart” (one). Many of these also came up when participants defined romance.

Based on these responses, romantic attraction is the desire to perform certain actions that have been socially constructed as romantic with a specific person, but it is also a desire for other actions that have romantic potential. I discuss this idea more in the next section. People experiencing romantic attraction often want to form a romantic relationship with another person; this includes spending time with, getting to know, being known by, being emotionally or physically intimate with, and thinking about that person. Ultimately, romantic attraction is a desire for romance, but what is romance?

Defining Romance

Eighty-nine people defined romance, and many of these definitions overlapped with those given for romantic attraction. A few people simply directed me to their previous answer, although one person said romance is "the act as opposed to the desire." This question was also open ended. There were more discussions of the social construction of romance in these responses than there were for romantic attraction and only eighteen indications of uncertainty.

Eleven participants called romance a social construct in one way or another, and ten people described "romance" as a performance or set of practices "with culturally understood meanings, narratives…and so on around romantic love and its institutions." Four people noted that their main source of information on romance is the media, and two explicitly acknowledged that the media is not an accurate source.

Seventeen participants defined "romance" as loving someone, and seventeen connected romance to displays of affection, need, or devotion. Twelve people brought up intimacy. Physical affection (indicated by seven participants), starting a life together or otherwise "intertwining… your lives" (eight), dating (seven), and unconditional love (two) were also common responses. Two people separated romance from sex. One person wrote that romance is "[b]eing alone with one person and completely content with just their company." Other descriptions include a very emotional connection (indicated by eight participants), emotional and physical closeness (five), some sort of desire (five), "caring" (three), "commitment" (two), exclusivity (two), "yearning" (one), "thoughtfulness" (one), respect (one), and selflessness (one). Six participants defined romance as partnership.

Romance was, not surprisingly, compared to friendship. Six people were unsure of the difference between the two: “I think it is a lot like being friends, but you want to spend a lot of time with the other person and do nice things for them, but I do have this with friends and I have no idea why it's different from being friends.” Or, as someone else tentatively said, romance is “[l]ike a friendship but just with kisses?” Six said romance goes beyond friendship, but one person described it as “[a] relationship that's different from friendship but also just as meaningful.” This definition compares romance and friendship and finds them both equally valuable.

The surest way to draw a line between romance and friendship is to define romance, as one participant said, on intent. Four participants said “romance” is defined by “whatever the people involved in a romance consider to be romantic;” romance is different for different people. One noted that romance involves the desire to be viewed as a couple, another said romance is “the actions taken to express one’s attraction to another,” and a third participant described romance as a way to show someone “how you feel about them.” As discussed above, actions socially constructed as romantic are not indicative of romance. Performing actions socially constructed as romantic while intending those actions to be romantic makes those actions romantic. Additionally, performing actions socially constructed as romantic without any romantic intentions does not necessarily make those actions romantic. Finally, performing actions that are not socially constructed as romantic, but intending those actions to be romantic makes those actions romantic. Raptor explains this well:

> Let’s say two people arrive on my doorstep. One of them has a bouquet of expensive roses from the florist. The other one has a dead bird in a plastic bag. We all know which one is to be considered the romantic gift (hint: it’s not the corpse)

> And it's not like I don't like flowers or am allergic or anything, I would probably be flattered. But I have no connection to roses, and like, you can give roses to more or less anyone
>
> Dead birds are not a standard gift, for pretty obvious reasons. A person bringing me a corpse in a plastic bag had to know me well enough to know that I collect bones and process them myself, and you don't go shopping for birds in the Dead Bird Shop around the corner, so that means this person didn't go out with the intent of getting me something and came back with an Appropriate Gift, they probably stumbled across something and thought about me (this 'something' just so happens to be a dead bird, because I'm weird) And then they had to go through the process of picking this bird up and bagging it and bringing it to me, probably pretty spontaneously and without a calendar event that says Find Dead Bird For Raptor with a time slot between three and four pm.
>
> You can't have Corpse I Found In a Ditch be romantic without some sort of connection here. Roses can be romantic, but it can also just, be a formula. Two plus Two Equals Romance. A shortcut for 'I care about you,' even though the person might …. not, actually.[60]

Raptor wrote this in response to Stella's discussion[61] of what is and is not romantic. Stella, like some of my survey participants, believes emotion is another key element of romance. Considering the emotion and intent behind actions and relationships makes it much easier to conceptualize the differences between friendship and romance. Romantic attraction plays a key role in making emotions and intentions romantic, so romance can be thought of as romantic emotions and intentions that are influenced by romantic attraction and societal constructs.

Comfort with Romance

I asked participants three questions relating to their comfort with romance when it is directed at them, discussed around them, or shown on television. Each question asked participants to place their comfort level on a scale of one to five, from not at all comfortable to very comfortable. Space was provided for them to elaborate if they felt the need. I received

---

60. Raptor, discussion of romance as intent.

61. Stella, discussion of romance as intent and emotion.

ninety-six responses for each scale question, seventy-two elaborations for romance directed at the participants, seventy-one for discussions of romance, and eighty for romance in television. In general, people were more uncomfortable with romance directed at them than they were with the other two situations; forty-three indicated they are not at all uncomfortable with romance when it is directed at them, compared to only seven "not at all"s for romance discussed around them and five for romance in television. Conversely, only two people marked that they are very comfortable with romance directed at them, while nineteen did the same for the discussion of romance and eight for romance in television. The most common answer to my questions on the discussion of romance and romance in television was a three on the comfort scale. Responses to all three questions included mentions of romance repulsion. Graphs of these results can be found in Appendix E.

Two main trends appear in the responses to my question about romance directed at participants. Eight people felt bad for having to turn the person down; three people said they felt guilty for hurting the other person's feelings and not being able to reciprocate. Fourteen participants also felt that the situation was made uncomfortable or awkward because they do not reciprocate those romantic feelings: "[I] have to reject them since I can't reciprocate and then I feel like I've harmed them just by existing. So I feel guilt for hurting them, and shame that I can't be normal like they want, and pity that they have to endure romantic feelings." While no one else mentioned feeling pity—a word whose use brings up its own set of questions that I cannot answer here—the rest of this response captures feelings expressed by other participants.

Eight differentiated having a friend confess romantic feelings versus a stranger. For six participants, a friend's confession is worse than a stranger's because it threatens their

relationship. Only two feel more comfortable with a friend because they trust their friends and believe their wishes will be respected. Six people stressed the importance of having their choices respected; they feel much more comfortable when whoever has feelings for them understands, respects their boundaries, and accepts that a romantic relationship will not happen.

Forty-three people, almost half of those surveyed, marked that they are "not at all" comfortable with romantic feelings being directed at them. Three people said they are romance repulsed in this situation. Twenty-nine people said they are "uncomfortable"—not surprising as I used this word in the question. Other words used to describe this feeling of discomfort include "awkward" (indicated by seven participants), "confused" (three), "stressed" (two), "embarrassed" (two), "horrifying" (two), "anxious" (two), "threatened" (two), "panic" (two), "unease" (two), "disappointed" (one), "disgusted" (one), "icky" (one), "self conscious" (one), "horrible" (one), "annoyed" (one), "afraid" (one), "dread and worry" (one), and "incomprehensible" (one). One person said they "would rather be set on fire than have people hit on or try to date" them. Four people noted that they do not know how to react, leading to discomfort. One person said declarations of romantic feelings can make them question their own feelings. Finally, someone explained they felt "almost ill" after people expressed romantic feelings toward them.

Six people answered with a four, while two answered with five (very comfortable). In the elaboration section, six people said they are flattered by romantic feelings directed at them. One participant said the initial attention is flattering, but is overshadowed by the pressure of expectations. Two others also commented on being unable to meet expectations. One person said they love it, another said it feels great, and a third said they desire it. Four people said they have

a hard time recognizing romantic attention in the first place. Clearly, there is no universal aromantic reaction to being asked out.

In general, people are more comfortable with others talking about their own romantic lives. Nine said they are happy for the people in healthy romantic relationships. Hearing friends talk about their romantic lives makes ten participants happy because they enjoy learning about their friends' lives; four of these participants said they are also rather good at giving relationship advice. Four people said this situation is more comfortable because they are not directly involved with the romance, and nine find it enjoyable. One person said they "adore romance, just not when it's aimed at" them. Ten do not mind either way, and another ten said they think it is "fine," "bearable," or "okay." Twenty-three participants said their comfort level depends on different factors like how they feel that day (indicated by four participants) and who is talking about romance (indicated by four). Four people become less comfortable the more detailed the discussion is; another four dislike when romance is the only topic of conversation. Similarly, four said conversations about romance are fine as long as there is no sense of romance superiority: "[s]o long as they do not insist that romance is necessary/superior…it's fine." Two people said they are fine with conversations about romance as long as no one asks them for advice.

Twenty-four participants rated their comfort level with this type of romance at the low end of the scale, indicating they are not at all comfortable; seven participants selected one and seventeen chose two. Many of the words and feelings used in the elaboration section match with what participants said for the question about romance directed at them; six people said romance not directed at them is "boring," five said it is "confusing," four said it is "annoying," two said it is not interesting, one said it is "awkward," one said it is gross, and one said it is disappointing.

Three people said adjacent romance makes them feel repulsed, two people said “nervous,” two said “sad,” and one said it makes them feel afraid. Two people said they “hate” hearing about or seeing other people’s romantic lives.

Negative answers to this question differ from answers to the previous question in a few ways. Four people said they feel “alienated,” “excluded,” or isolated by conversations about romance. Three people said they dislike how these conversations remind them that they are missing out on something; as one participant said, they “find it odd and uncomfortable when others discuss their romantic lives, and [they] feel like an alien outsider observing a foreign species that [they] cannot connect with and cannot understand. It makes [them] feel robotic; cold and empty as [they] feel nothing yet others have a whole world that [the participant] cannot hope to tap into.” Nine also described being unable to relate. PDA makes four participants uncomfortable or repulsed. Finally, three people stated they do not care for all the drama involved in these types of conversations.

The distribution of answers to my question about romance in television is very similar to that of discussion of other people’s romantic lives. Additionally, negative responses to romance in television paralleled the reactions to the previous situations. Some participants feel “bored” (six participants), “annoyed” (three), “awkward” (two), and disappointed (one) by romance in television; others described television romance as unrelatable (five), “unrealistic” (two), “not very interesting” (two), “weird” (one), “pointless” (one), “dumb” (one), “fake” (one), “cringy and awful” (one), “trite” (one), or unnatural (one). One person said they hate it, and another said they are repulsed by it. One participant said they are “a lot more uncomfortable with fictional romance than real-life romance…because we're forced to watch the

intimate details for an extended amount of time when it's fictional." Another said "[i]t feels intrusive and inappropriate to watch romance on TV." Romance in television also makes one person feel as though they are missing out on "a great wonder of human experience." Finally, seven participants expressed their dismay over PDA and explicit sexuality on screen.

A majority of responders (sixty-seven) marked their comfort level as three or higher. Nine said they enjoy romance in television, while forty-eight said they *sometimes* enjoy it depending on a few factors. In response to the final question, one participant said they like romance in fiction because it helps them understand it. Thirty people said they are fine with romance if it is well written—meaning the relationship is healthy, believable, convincing, makes sense, and is not forced or abusive. Thirteen people complained about how heteronormative television is, and five specified that these relationships tend to be toxic or forced. Seven expressed greater interest in queer romance. In fact, when queer relationships were mentioned, they were mentioned positively, but straight relationships were only brought up to highlight elements of television romance people would like to see change. Six people said they do not like romance in television when it is forced, but did not specify between straight or queer romances. In their response to the final question, one participant said they "would care less about badly written romance if [they] weren't aware that it's often used because writers believe romance is necessary to include to the point of needing to force it in." Twelve people emphasized the importance of portraying healthy romances on television and expressed their dislike of toxic or abusive romances. One person answered the final question by saying their comfort with romance on television depends on the day, their mood, and "how many romantic images [they] see in a period of time."

The way romance is displayed on television—beyond being well written and healthy—also affects how comfortable people are. Some said they need to be convinced:

> Because I don't know what a crush feels like, I have a hard time believing two characters can be head-over-heels, madly in love at first sight with each other without a solid friendship first. If I can't easily explain why two characters are 'in love' with each other (just simply stating 'she's pretty'/'he's funny' doesn't count), then I don't enjoy watching that relationship. What are their shared hobbies, life experiences, passions, etc? What do they respect about each other as a person? Tell me definitively what these two characters like about each other, and then I will believe they are in a healthy romantic relationship if the piece of media claims it as one.

A basis in friendship is important to four individuals, and subtle, "softer" romantic displays like "hand holding, cheek touching, forehead presses" are preferred by two. One person used the final question to say this type of "'soft core' romance" makes them more comfortable because it "appears relatively platonic in nature" and is not "overtly romantic."

Many participants complained about aspects of romance in television that are clear examples of amatonormativity at work. Three participants dislike it when romance dominates or derails plots and characterization. Eight participants prefer romance as a subplot, eight expressed displeasure over television shows that are too dependent on romance, eight dislike shows with unnecessary romance, and three dislike ones that use romance for drama and little else; as one participant said in their response to the final question, they are "sick to death of romance being such a major part of most shows." Four wished for more shows without romance. Eleven people also dislike the way "media emphasizes romantic relationships as the be-all-end-all to success and happiness in life." One person said romance is often "incorporated quite lazily." Romance is overused in television shows because romance is considered a universal human experience and valued over other relationship types. Poorly written romance can also be blamed on

amatonormativity (and heteronormativity, racism, ableism, etc) because, as one participant said, "two young, conventionally attractive, usually white people are in the same room for more than 30 seconds, clearly they [must] be attracted to each other!" and so the writers put less effort into developing what they believe is already obvious. Finally, television and other media treat romantic relationships as the ultimate achievement; this is amatonormative.

Much of people's discomfort with romance in television, then, seems to come from aggressive amatonormativity and the social construction of romance, not from the romantic intentions displayed on screen. For example, one participant said the fact "people who seem not to like each other are considered good romantic partners" makes them uncomfortable. Participants called out the romanticization of abusive relationships and the reliance on amatonormative/heteronormative assumptions about men, women, and romance to convince audiences that a relationship is romantic; these problems stem from current social constructions of romance. While this perspective is certainly not universal, it is interesting to consider. Of course, some participants are made uncomfortable by romance no matter how secondary or well written it is.

The Bigger Picture

It is clear that individual aromantics think about, interact with, and handle romance differently. This is not surprising. However, one common strategy, both in my survey responses and in the community as a whole, is to analyze and critique the social construction of romance, the relationship hierarchy, and the way romance is portrayed in television (and other forms of media). In doing so, we can begin to dismantle amatonormativity and the relationship hierarchy, as well as heteronormativity.

Amatonormativity constructs a relationship hierarchy as described by Irrationalpoint and discussed by Kaz. Survey participants noted many of the ways the relationship hierarchy harms aromantic individuals specifically. Four people criticized this hierarchy in their answers to the question on others' romantic lives, and eleven did so in their answers to the question on romance in television. Two participants addressed it directly in their answers to the final question; one said "we as a society shouldn't prioritize romantic relationships over other types of love like friends and family," while the other mentioned "phrases like 'friendship that GRADUATES into romance' [and] 'could so & so be something MORE?' [that imply] platonic friendships are less than romantic ones." One participant said they feel sad when other people talk about romance because this participant believes their friends "don't think [their] friendship is as important as the [romantic] relationship." Another participant said their "friends are rapidly becoming distant acquaintances as their friendships become less important than their domestic lives." A final participant said they wish "people understood that romance isn't more precious than friendship" and wonder why "people tend to think that it's okay to drop your friend when you have a datefriend." The idea that the truest relationships are romantic and that all other relationships are lacking in some way harms aromantics (and others) by suggesting—and in some ways requiring—our friends care about their significant others more than us, but also by creating the idea that romance is the ultimate—and for aromantics, unachievable—goal. The relationship hierarchy says that romance is the pinnacle of human happiness, yet many aromantics will never experience it; this is alienating and demoralizing. Acknowledging the damage done by the relationship hierarchy is a key step to dismantling amatonormativity and heteronormativity.

Amatonormativity and heteronormativity are closely related. Heteronormativity says men must date women—a romantic relationship is required. The amatonormative aspect of heteronormativity is part of what makes LGBT people form straight romantic relationships, because the pressure to participate in a (correct) romantic relationship is immense. These relationships must be heterosexual because we live in a heteronormative society. Finally, amatonormativity pushes people into romantic relationships they might not want and asks them to ignore the other important relationships in their lives; this can lead to abusive relationships. Many, many scholars, activists, and others have written about heteronormativity, but amatonormativity has received less attention. This is unfortunate because by deconstructing amatonormativity, we challenge heteronormativity as well.

The existence of aromanticism proves romance is not a universal human experience or goal. Romance is not a requirement for being happy or human. Other relationships, like friendship, can be just as important and fulfilling as romance; that is to say, romance is not superior. Finally, gestures and actions cannot be inherently romantic. All of these statements challenge heteronormativity. Men and women are expected to fall in love, get married, and have children, and it is assumed that everyone wants these things because wanting these things is what makes us normal humans. Those not in a (straight) relationship are presumably sad and miserable, even if they think they are happy—imagine the plot of any romantic comedy. Once someone has entered a straight relationship, they are expected to separate themselves from their family in order to start their own. Friendships are also relegated to the side so the new couple can focus on themselves; because romantic love is the ultimate everything, friends are unnecessary. Heteronormativity also interprets certain actions as inherently romantic when performed between

males and females; if a young boy and girl interact, it is assumed they like each other. If a man and a woman spend time alone together, they must be dating. These are heteronormative and amatonormative assumptions and expectations.

It is important to consider amatonormativity when discussing heteronormativity. Replacing the current system with one that accepts queer romantic relationships but still requires some form of romantic relationship only solves part of the problem. Aromantics have made impressive progress toward deconstructing romance, rethinking relationships, and challenging amatonormativity, but there are many questions that remain unanswered. Instead of attempting to list all of these, I will recap some of the questions I asked previously: Is romantic attraction oriented toward gender, like the split attraction model suggests, or is it unaffected by gender, like Diamond writes? Is the aromantic community predominantly white and female, like my survey results suggest? Is there a specific year when aromanticism began to take off? What can we learn from "autochorisromanticism," or identity-less romanticism? How do stereotypes about autism, mental health, emotional abuse, and aromanticism interact? How do those interactions affect aromantics and non-aromantics? One participant said they feel "pity" for those that "have to endure romantic feelings," but is this a common notion among aromantics? Answering these questions and continuing to discuss aromanticism has the potential to dismantle amatonormativity and heteronormativity.

Conclusion

Aromanticism embodies many things including, but not at all limited to, not experiencing romantic attraction, a disinterest in romance, romance repulsion, being confused by romance, and rarely experiencing romantic attraction. Looking at aromanticism as a whole, it is easy to say that

it represents a separation from romance, but this ignores the complexity of aromantic experiences. The simple, easy definition of "aromantic" is "someone who does not experience romantic attraction," while a more accurate definition could fill a book. As the concept of aromanticism challenges the idea that romance is universal, it seems especially ironic to claim there is some sort of universal aromantic experience.

When talking about aromanticism, it is important to have a solid understanding of what romance is. Our concept of romance is heavily influenced by our society. Because of this, the right type of romance (i.e. heterosexual, cis, white, able bodied, etc) is valued above familial and platonic relationships; people are expected to form romantic relationships that conform to this ideal as closely as possible. Certain actions are constructed as inherently romantic, but their actual romantic implications depend on the intent and emotions of the people involved.

Aromantics navigate our amatonormative society in a variety of ways, which sometimes contradict each other because different aromantics have very different feelings about romance. Some are repulsed by romance and try to avoid it; others embrace it. One common strategy is to deconstruct romance and challenge amatonormativity. Aromanticism counters social constructions of romance and offers a unique perspective. Aromanticism exists, and it has the potential to completely change how we think about romance, relationships, and human nature.

Bibliography

Anagnori, discussing how they realized they were aromantic. October 10. Accessed April 10, 2017. http://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/99664178347/hello-i-was-just-wondering-how-u-found-out-ur.

———"Words and Concepts Used in Asexual Communities." November 21. Accessed February 2214, 2017. http://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/67669933207/words-and-concepts-used-in-asexual-communities.

———"You Might Be Aromantic If…." December 6. Accessed April 1, 2015. http://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/69145328274/you-might-be-aromantic-if.

Arospecawarenessweek. "Frequently Asked Questions." Accessed March 3, 2017. http://arospecawarenessweek.tumblr.com/askus.

———"Glossary of Terms." Accessed November 14, 2015. http://arospecawarenessweek.tumblr.com/glossary.

Beall, Anne E. and Robert J. Sternberg. "The Social Construction of Love." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12, no. 3 (2016): 417-438. Accessed on February 2, 2017. doi: 10.1177/0265407595123006.

Bogaert, Anthony. "Asexuality and Autochorissexualism (Identity-Less Sexuality)." *Archives Of Sexual Behavior* 41, no. 6 (2012): 1513-1514. Accessed September 22, 2015. doi: 10.1007/s10508-012-9963-1.

Brake, Elizabeth. Pages 88-89 in *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Brogaard, Berit. *On Romantic Love: Simple Truths about a Complex Emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Cakeatthefortress. "A Mystery that is the A-Romantic Community History." November 8, 2015. https://cakeatthefortress.wordpress.com/2015/11/08/a-mystery-that-is-the-a-romantic-community-history-revision-1/.

Carrigan, Mark, Kristina Gupta, and Todd G. Morrison. "Asexuality Special Theme Issue Editorial." *Psychology & Sexuality* 4, no. 2 (2013): 111-120. Accessed February 3, 2017. doi: 10.1080/19419899.2013.774160.

Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. “Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential.” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 405-426. Accessed on September 27, 2015. http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=1a10fa44-ee40-4cd3-b592-eef2c2fc70d0%40sessionmgr101&vid=0&hid=115&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=91978332&db=aph.

Decker, Julie Sondra. “Romantic Orientation.” In *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014. Kindle version.

Diamond, Lisa M. "What Does Sexual Orientation Orient? A Biobehavioral Model Distinguishing Romantic Love and Sexual Desire.” *Psychological Review* 110, no. 1 (2003): 173-192. Accessed on January 31, 2017. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.110.1.173.

Hendrick, Susan S. and Clyde Hendrick. *Romantic Love*. California: Sage Publications, 1992.

Kaz. "A/romanticism.” December 24, 2010. Accessed on January 31, 2017. http://kazaera.livejournal.com/234715.html.

Lezgem, discussion of split attraction model and homophobia. 2015. http://lezgem.tumblr.com/post/121918941089/how-is-being-biromantic-homosexual-homophobic. Accessed September 23, 2015; site now discontinued.

Mosbergen, Dominique. “The Asexual Spectrum: Identities In The Ace Community.” February 2, 2016. Accessed April 10, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/19/asexual-spectrum_n_3428710.html?1371648467.

Raptor, discussion of romance as intent. February 21, 2017. Accessed March 17, 2017. http://thenearsightedmicroraptor.tumblr.com/post/157539914733/obstinaterixatrix-everything-thats-considered.

Ruebird, discussing the separation between romantic and sexual attraction. 2015. Accessed April 10, 2017. http://ruebird.tumblr.com/post/108402028159/i-keep-seeing-so-many-folks-saying-things-like-i.

Scherrer, K. S. “What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion.” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 22, no. 1 and 2 (2010): 56-73. doi: 10.1080/10538720903332255.

Seidman, Steven. "The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Reconsidered." *Journal Of Social History* 24, no. 1 (1990): 47-67. Accessed on February 19, 2017. http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=09507f96-a7b6-4144-aef9-4e14dc5e2cce%40sessionmgr102&vid=0&hid=115&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=9608050499&db=a9h.

Singer, Irving. *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Socialjusticeorwhatever, discussion of split attraction model's origins. 2015. http://socialjusticeorwhatever.tumblr.com/post/129317904623/i-feel-like-when-talking-about-the. Accessed November 14, 2015; site now discontinued.

Stella, discussion of romance as intent and emotion. September 9, 2016. Accessed March 17, 2017. http://obstinaterixatrix.tumblr.com/post/150158168534/everything-thats-considered-romantic-has-been.

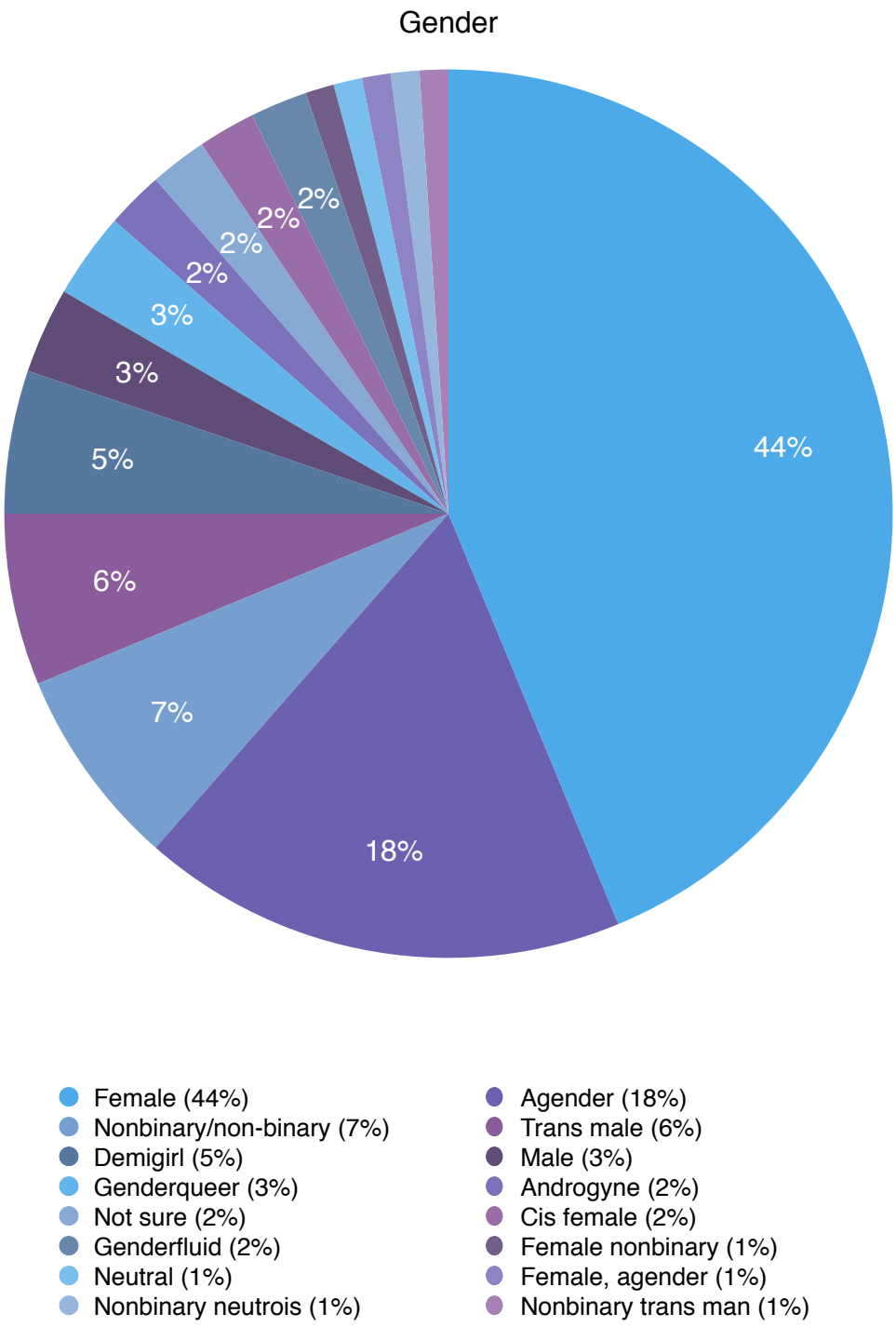
The Thinking Asexual. "Amatonormativity, Romance, and Partnership: My Problem with 'Cupioromanticism.'" October 8, 2014. https://thethinkingasexual.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/amatanormativity-romance-and-partnership-my-problem-with-cupioromanticism/. Accessed November 15, 2015; site now discontinued.

Thingsthatmakeyouacey, discussing race and asexuality. April 16, 2014. Accessed November 19, 2015. http://thingsthatmakeyouacey.tumblr.com/post/82945597477/itkind-of-is-when-it-comes-to-the-community.

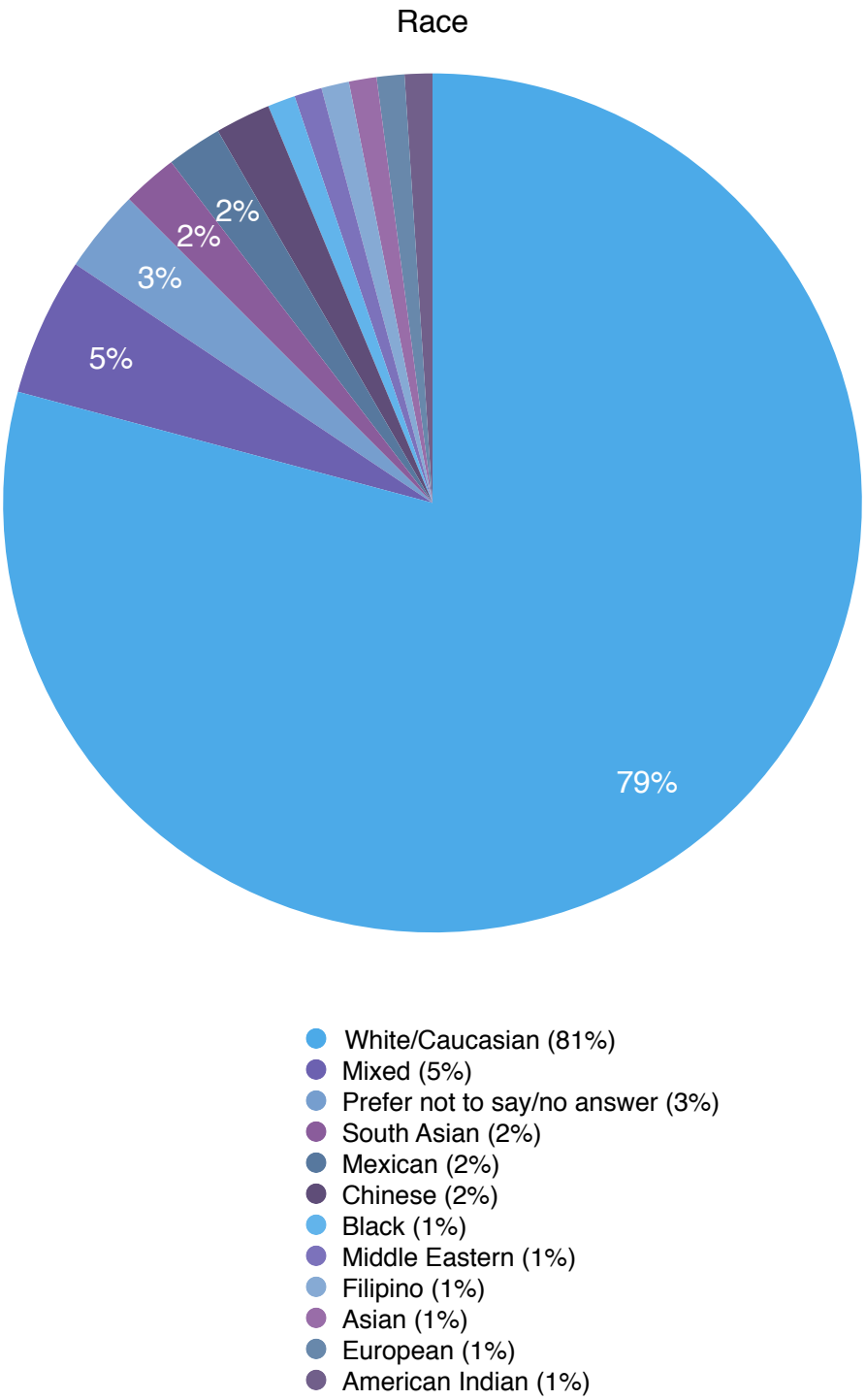
———"Asexuality as a White Supremacist Dream." October 31, 2014. Accessed November 19, 2015. http://thingsthatmakeyouacey.tumblr.com/post/101323745334/asexuality-as-a-white-supremacist-dream.

Wherry, Maryan. "Introduction: Love and Romance in American Culture." *Journal Of American Culture* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1-5. Accessed on February 19, 2017. doi: 10.1111/jacc.12007.

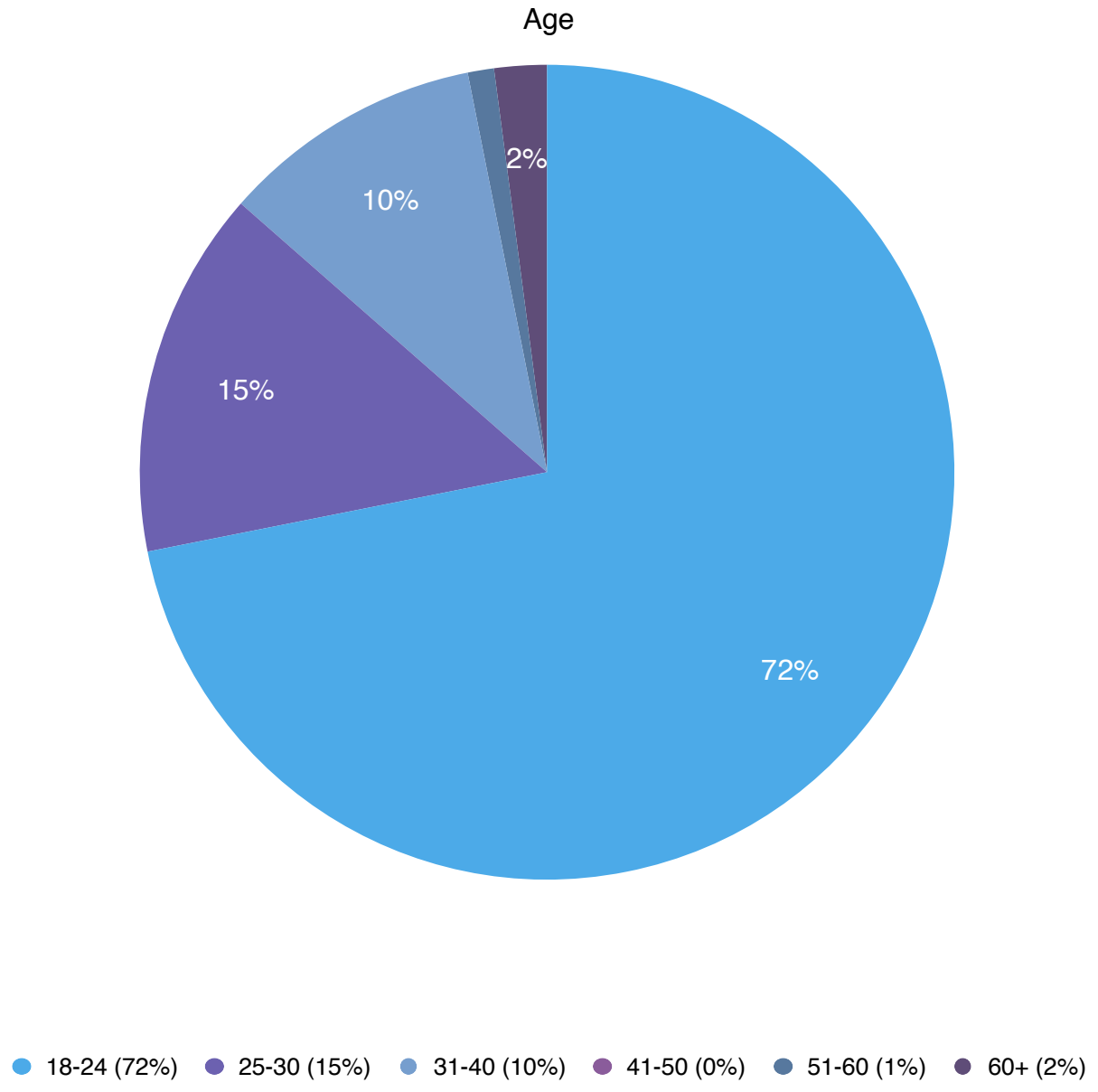
Appendix A


Gender
44%
18%
7%
6%
5%
3%
3%
2%
2%
2%
2%
Female (44%)
Nonbinary/non-binary (7%)
Demigirl (5%)
Genderqueer (3%)
Not sure (2%)
Genderfluid (2%)
Neutral (1%)
Nonbinary neutrois (1%)
Agender (18%)
Trans male (6%)
Male (3%)
Androgyne (2%)
Cis female (2%)
Female nonbinary (1%)
Female, agender (1%)
Nonbinary trans man (1%)

Appendix B

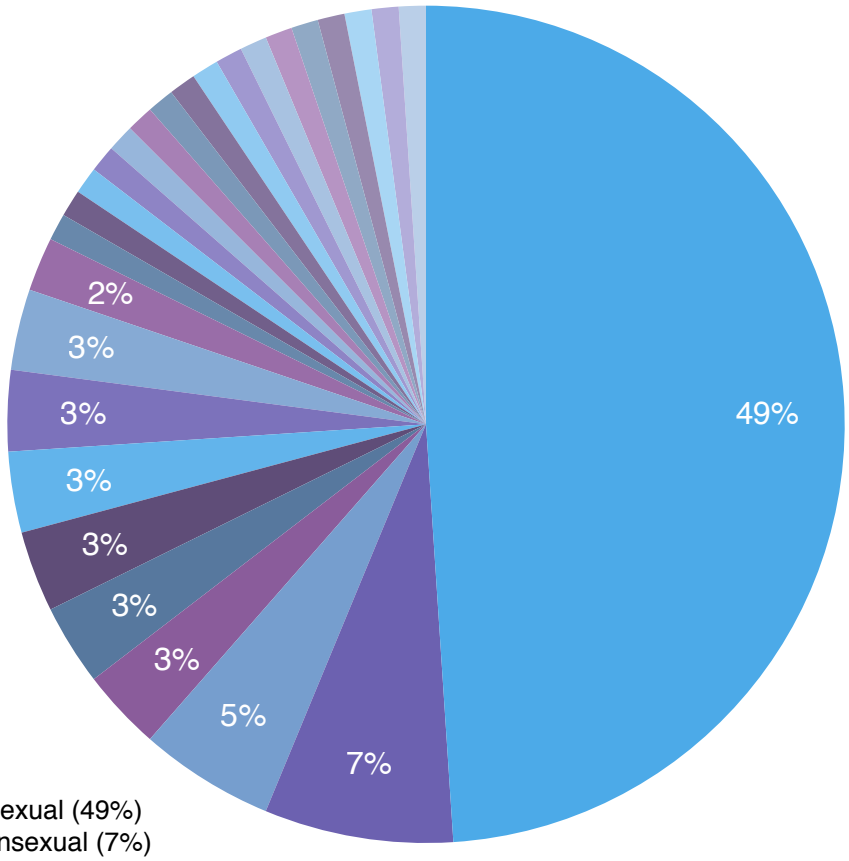

Race
79%
5%
3%
2%
2%
White/Caucasian (81%)
Mixed (5%)
Prefer not to say/no answer (3%)
South Asian (2%)
Mexican (2%)
Chinese (2%)
Black (1%)
Middle Eastern (1%)
Filipino (1%)
Asian (1%)
European (1%)
American Indian (1%)

Appendix C



Appendix D

Sexual and Romantic Orientation

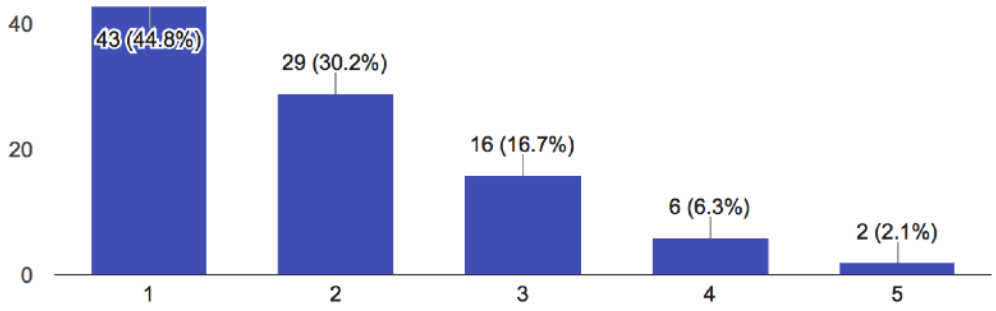


- Aromantic asexual (49%)
- Aromantic pansexual (7%)
- Aromantic bisexual (5%)
- Demiromantic asexual (3%)
- Aromantic heterosexual (3%)
- Greyromantic asexual (3%)
- Aroflux asexual (3%)
- Greyromantic bisexual (3%)
- Aromantic with either no sexual orientation given or questioning sexual orientation (3%)
- Unsure/questioning for romantic and sexual attraction (2%)
- Female (1%)
- Asexual questioning aromantic (1%)
- Heterosexual (1%)
- Aroflux gay (1%)
- Greyromantic asexual lesbian (1%)
- Greyromantic demisexual (1%)
- Grey heteroromantic asexual (1%)
- Aromantic homosexual (1%)
- Aromantic omnisexual (1%)
- Aromantic greysexual (1%)
- Quoiromantic gay (1%)
- Quoiromantic asexual (1%)
- Quoiromantic bisexual (1%)
- Apresromantic asexual (1%)
- Pan demiaromantic asexual (1%)
- Hetero demiaromantic asexual (1%)
- Gay demiromantic asexual (1%)

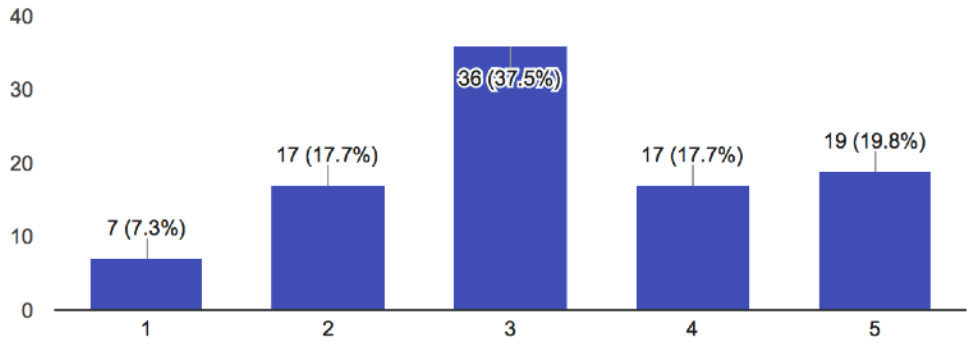
Appendix E

How comfortable are you with romance in your own life? Use your own definition of romance.

When other people demonstrate romantic feelings about you? (96 responses)



When other people talk about their own romantic lives, separate from yours? (96 responses)



How comfortable are you with romance in TV shows in general? Use your own definition of romance. (96 responses)