A Sociocultural Linguistic Analysis of Asexual Identity Construction in an Online Forum

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(she/her, they/them)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the construction of asexual identities by members of an online community of practice (the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, AVEN) which comes together around the discussion of asexuality. Data from an online ethnography and the distribution of a survey to community members have been analysed using discourse analysis and a sociocultural linguistic approach to explore the social contexts in which asexual identities are formed and the influence that they have upon the sorts of identity that community members can adopt. Using a theoretical framework which incorporates Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005), the community of practice model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and queer linguistics, this thesis focuses upon the construction of individual identities, as well as that of the community of practice as a whole. It also looks at how the structure of the community influences the identities that individuals can claim and how these identities are negotiated between community members. I show that offering support and guidance, as well as engaging in debates about asexual topics, are important community practices which create a safe and productive environment for exploring asexual identities. Further, this thesis considers the way in which the community positions itself and asexuality in relation to the wider world; key to this is an investigation of the influence of allonormativity and issues of belonging and exclusion. I also look at the relevance of the community of practice model for understanding the online AVEN context.

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1 Introduction

As a sexual identity that has only been recognised for a relatively short amount of time, and one which affects only a small proportion of the population, asexuality is often poorly understood and poorly represented in everyday society. For individuals who find themselves experiencing asexuality, then, it can be uncommon to even encounter the term. As shall be shown in this thesis, finding communities of like-minded individuals can be revelatory for those whose asexual identities leave them feeling marginalised or erased, and can instigate the adoption of new identities and ways of understanding oneself.

This thesis is concerned with how self-identified asexual people use language to construct and perform their identities. It utilises a sociocultural linguistic approach to analyse the language used by members of an online forum, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), and investigates how their identities are formed and how they are shaped by social factors. Key to this is an exploration of their engagement with the community and its members, and the resulting impact upon their sense of belonging and inclusion.

This chapter provides an introduction to asexuality as well as a consideration of the value of research for increasing its visibility. It also provides an overview of the aims and structure of this thesis and a brief introduction to the AVEN research site.

1.1 Introducing asexuality

Originally a biological term for describing organisms ‘lacking sexual organs or function’ or which reproduce ‘without the fusion of male and female gametes’ (Oxford English Dictionary (OED), 2021), contemporary uses of ‘asexual’ include human sexuality, describing those who do not experience feelings of sexual attraction or desire. The OED suggests the earliest known attribution for this sense dates back to 1862 but asexuality was not widely adopted as an identity until much more recently (Waters, 2020). Sometimes used synonymously with ‘non-sexual’ and ‘un-sexual’, ‘asexual’ is today arguably the most common term for this identity. The issue of defining asexuality is explored more deeply in Chapter 5.

Bogaert (2004) provides the most widely accepted figure for the prevalence of asexuality at 1.05% of the population. He also notes that the prevalence of same-sex attraction (the combined values for homosexuality and bisexuality) is very similar to that of asexuality at 1.11%. We might therefore expect that asexuality warrants a similar level of attention to homosexuality and yet, asexuals remain a relatively hidden population; public awareness of asexuality is still low and many people do not understand what it means in the context of human sexuality (Decker, 2014).

Although the characterisation of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction highlights the most significant factor for identifying as asexual, it is worth pointing out that this may also be viewed as overly simplistic. This is because asexuals typically distinguish between sexual attraction, as 'a desire for sexual contact', and romantic attraction, as 'a desire for a romantic relationship'[1] (AVEN wiki, 2022), creating a myriad of possible identity labels under the banner of asexuality (Purdy, 2015). Further, whilst some asexuals do abstain from sex, there are many reasons why others do not, such as compromising with the needs of a sexual partner or for the purpose of having children (Decker, 2014). Far from being a simple lack of a supposedly key characteristic of human life, then, asexuality represents a diverse group of people who must negotiate their identities in the context of differing experiences and behaviours.

Asexual people must also negotiate their identities in relation to the wider world. The concept of allosexuality is therefore important throughout this thesis, with 'allosexual' referring to people who *do* experience sexual desire and/or attraction (Chen, 2020; Decker, 2014; Przybylo, 2019). This term is sometimes unpopular amongst the people to whom it refers (Decker, 2014) but my preference for it here is a reflection of it being one of the most widely used options available, as well as an attempt to clearly link the concept of allonormativity – that is, the ideological assumption that feelings of sexual attraction are universal to all humans – to the concept of allosexuality. This would be obscured by using 'sexual' instead of 'allosexual', whilst an alternative term for allonormativity, 'sexnormativity', can also relate to gender normativity. I therefore favour the terms 'allonormativity' and 'allosexuality' which each have only one distinct meaning. I use these terms throughout this thesis.

[1] Some individuals also reference other attraction types, such as sensual and aesthetic attraction, but these are less common and will not be the focus of this thesis.

Until recently, the attributes which are associated with human asexuality were referred to in the scientific literature only in terms of sexual and mental health disorders. The most commonly cited example is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) which, until the fourth edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; see also, Flore, 2014), labelled a lack of sexual desire as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) and characterised it as a category upon which mental health problems could be diagnosed. This stance is allonormative, assuming that sexuality and sexual desire are intrinsic to the human condition and suggesting that absence of desire necessarily indicates abnormality (Flore, 2014). The medical sciences therefore saw the possibility of correcting the afflicted individual via medical or therapeutic intervention.

Owing in part to such pathologisation, a number of asexual studies have been highly medicalised. Key examples have been concerned with the physiology of asexual experience (Brotto and Yule, 2011; Prause and Harenski, 2014) and the possibility of links between asexuality and disability (Labuski, 2014) and mental health conditions (McInroy, *et al*., 2020; Yule *et al*., 2013). There is similarity here with research into and attitudes towards homosexuality (for example, Savic and Lindström, 2008) and trans people (MacKinnon, 2018, provides an overview), which is indicative of the marked and stigmatised nature of these identities, and Schüklenk and Ristow (1996) question the ethics of pathologising research in the case of homosexuality. Although my own research is unconcerned by the aetiology of asexual experiences, the existence of such studies contextualise the critical responses that many asexuals receive when revealing their sexuality (Decker, 2014) and the relief felt upon discovering that asexuality exists and that they are not alone in their experiences (see Chapters 6 and 7).

It is important to acknowledge that a lack of sexual desire *can* be linked legitimately to physical and mental health disorders, and to be clear that the issue is that resources such as the DSM categorise *any* lack of sexual desire as inherently problematic without discretion[2]. This issue has been at the forefront of lobbying about asexual awareness and, consequently, the publication of DSM-5 featured amendments which state that a diagnosis of 'female sexual

[2] Similar claims have been made about the DSM's pathologisation of homosexuality (Drescher, 2015) and trans bodies (Anderson, 2019).

interest/ arousal disorder' and 'male hypoactive sexual desire disorder' would not be made if the individual identified as asexual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Whilst the need for individuals to self-identify as asexual is still considered problematic in this context (see, for example, Asexuality Archive, 2015), the updated criteria represents a significant turning point and official validation of asexuality.

This is important because it helps to affirm asexuality as an inherent, involuntary, state of being, separating it from celibacy as a chosen avoidance of sexual acts. This is particularly pertinent when we consider that mischaracterisation of asexuality can lead to it being co-opted to represent celibacy. For example, Fahs (2010) suggests that asexuality offers an answer to radical feminist thinking which believes that increased sexual liberation and justice is insufficient to overcome the patriarchal power structure of sex. This argument reduces asexuality to a choice and overlooks the many aspects of asexuality which can cause suffering, insecurity and, crucially, the loss (rather than gaining) of power and social standing. Hiramoto (2012) and Hiramoto and Pua (2019) also utilise, and therefore reinforce, this problematic understanding of asexuality to refer to abstinence from sex amongst masculine characters in martial arts films. These usages may be perceived as damaging to the asexual cause, muddying the waters around what asexuality is, and therefore highlight the continued need to raise awareness of asexuality.

1.1.1 The value of asexual research and activism

As I have shown, asexuality is prone to mischaracterisation, marginalisation and erasure. Asexual activism is therefore key to increasing awareness, encouraging tolerance and understanding, and providing support networks for asexual individuals (AVEN, 2022). Asexual research also has an important role to play in educating people and increasing the visibility of this identity.

The above-mentioned studies on the physiological and medical aspects of asexuality have helped to validate asexuality as a viable sexuality. However, as Przybylo states, this has been achieved by 'rehearsing harmful and myopic ideas of sexuality and sexual-gendered difference' (2012: 239) which map asexuality onto the body; these studies thus restrict the shape that asexuality takes in the public consciousness. Although they further discussions of

asexuality, then, they also raise questions about how discussions can be better served going forwards.

An alternative approach is demonstrated in professional contexts which have sought to improve experiences for asexual service users. Studies have shown evidence that increasing awareness of asexuality among service providers can help improve the services they offer. For example, Steelman and Hertlein (2016) consider the potential benefits for couples therapy sessions which include an asexual partner and Jones *et al*. (2017) explore the implications in healthcare contexts which are currently underused by asexuals fearing pathologisation. Interestingly, Jones *et al*. note that AVEN's inclusive definition of asexuality could make increased awareness difficult as they believe that healthcare practitioners desire a more solid definition which can clearly delineate what does and does not count as asexuality. This mirrors the concerns of some members of the AVEN community and thus, whilst I do not seek to resolve this issue, I will look closely at definitions of asexuality in order to expose the ways it can be understood (Chapter 5) and the issues posed by the community's diversity (Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Despite evidence of an increasing focus upon asexuality in the social sciences (see Carrigan, 2012; Cuthbert, 2017; Fallon, 2015; Gupta, 2014; Kim, 2014; Pacho, 2017; Scherrer, 2008; Sundrud, 2011; Vares, 2018), asexuality is still under-represented in comparison to other sexual identities, even more so in linguistics. Exceptions exist in Fine's (2019) research into the phonetic presentation of a greysexual[3] identity and, Jas' (2020) consideration of how innovations in the language of asexuality could broaden the vocabulary of sexuality more generally to better accommodate trans and non-binary identities. The paucity of linguistic research on asexuality contrasts with many other minority identities within language and sexuality studies (Jones, 2021). Such research has helped shed light upon the lived experiences of individuals who identify with these categories (for example, Jones, 2012; Leap, 2011; Liang, 1997; Podesva, 2007; Rudwick and Msibi, 2016; Thorne, 2013) and shows the progress and remaining hurdles encountered by them in their pursuit of rights. Thus, a lack of similar asexual research constitutes a gap warranting further attention.

[3] Greysexuality (also referred to as grey-asexuality) describes people who tend towards asexuality but may at times experience degrees of sexual attraction or desire.

With this thesis, then, I build upon existing social sciences research on asexuality and sociolinguistic studies of sexuality in order to expand the discussion of asexual identities further into the sociolinguistic discipline. This will add to linguistic sexuality narratives, further increase the small body of research into asexuality and contribute to the asexual movement's aims of increasing understanding and awareness of asexuality.

1.2 Research questions, research site and structure of thesis

The rest of this chapter outlines the aims of this thesis via introducing my research questions and offering an overview of my research site. Finally, I summarise the chapters which follow.

1.2.1 Research questions

Although the overall focus of my research is the construction of asexual identities, the following research questions (RQs) narrow and facilitate my investigation:

1) How is asexuality defined by AVEN's users and what bearing does this have upon how its members see themselves/ their identities?
2) What impact does (allo)normativity have upon asexual identities?
3) How do individuals negotiate their asexual identities in such a diverse community?
4) What influence does the structure of the AVEN community of practice have upon the identities that members adopt?

The ways in which asexuality is defined play an important role in educating people about what asexuality is and what it means to those who identify with it. RQ1 therefore focuses upon how AVEN members define asexuality, what these definitions reveal about what counts as asexual and the impact they have upon members' perceptions of their own and others' identities and asexuality more broadly. It involves investigating the lexis used to construct asexual identities and ideals, particularly the framing of definitions in relation to sexual concepts. This will enable greater understanding of how the AVEN population understands itself and how members position themselves in relation to the community and the outside world.

RQ2 aims to determine how asexuality is framed in relation to sexuality and sexual ideals. Key to this will be an investigation of how allonormativity impacts upon asexual identities and how asexuality is linguistically constructed in relation to allosexuality, heterosexuality and LGBTQ+[4] sexualities and ideals. I will therefore investigate the ways that asexuals relate to the sexual world and its ideals and whether they choose to identify with the word 'queer' (a debate referenced in Decker, 2014). This will show where asexuals believe they fit within the spectrum of sexual identities and may indicate their feelings regarding the non-normativity of asexuality. The investigation of such factors will illuminate asexual perceptions of social attitudes towards asexuality, some of the prejudices faced and situations in which individuals feel at ease discussing their sexualities. This will contribute to the sociolinguistic literature on sexuality and identity studies, offering insights into the ways that minority groups – in this case, asexuals – experience social norms and, by their very existence, challenge hegemonic allonormative ideals.

RQ3 explores the construction of asexual identities within the community setting of the AVEN forums. In particular, I aim to uncover how a group identity is constructed between AVEN's members, with emphasis upon the ways that members negotiate their different views and experiences. This is an important focus due to the large number of subcategories of asexuality, with individuals in each group facing very different lived experiences. Compare, for example, aromantic asexuals (who do not experience any sexual or romantic desire towards any gender), heteroromantic demisexuals (who may experience sexual attraction to an opposite-sex partner after a deep bond has been established) and sex-repulsed homoromantic asexuals (who do not experience sexual attraction, and feel great discomfort at the idea of sexual intercourse, but may well form a romantic partnership with a person of the same sex). All of these identities, and many more besides, entail different experiences of prejudice and acceptance, relationships and understandings of who they are and how they relate to asexual, allosexual, heterosexual and LGBTQ+ populations and communities. Exploring how these different experiences are negotiated and how such identities are accommodated by the community, then, will be important to understanding the identity of the AVEN community as a whole.

[4] 'LGBTQ+' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other) is my preferred version of the acronym as I believe it to be the most inclusive but least cumbersome form available.

Finally, RQ4 concerns the structure of the AVEN forums and the influence they have upon the identities that community members adopt. Discussed in Section 2.3.1, a community of practice (CoP) is a community in which members come together with shared aims, engage in a common set of practices, and learn the ways of the community via their engagement with its members and practices. I classify AVEN as a CoP, and RQ4 examines how the community's rules, structure and practices shape its members' identities. This will involve analysing interactions from the forums and considering issues of alignment with and against community norms, hierarchy and power between members, and the impact of rules which restrict user behaviour. An investigation of the community's moderation practices will be important here, as will a consideration of informal means of influencing behaviour enacted between the community's standard members.

Ultimately, these aims help me to explore the question of what it means to be an asexual within the context of AVEN. This will be facilitated by consideration of the community's aims of education, awareness and socialisation and of the structure of the community in terms of its membership, rules and efforts to educate. The social and cultural contexts in which AVEN operates, and against which asexuality is constructed, will therefore be key to my interpretations. As is discussed in Chapter 2, a sociocultural linguistic approach, which utilises the CoP model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005) to explore negotiated identity, offers a crucial means of ensuring that these factors are fully integrated into my analyses.

1.2.2 AVEN as the research site

Although a more detailed overview will follow in Chapter 4, I briefly introduce AVEN here. As a website hosting information and attempting to raise awareness of asexuality, AVEN occupies an esteemed position within asexual culture, being widely cited in asexual scholarship (e.g.: Bogaert, 2015b; Decker, 2014; Purdy, 2015), and in media publications (Bogaert, 2015a; Marsh, 2020; Waters, 2021). It also hosts its own forums comprising a community of over 144,000 registered users (at the time of writing) from around the world. Given my research aims, this thesis focuses on the forum content which features individuals constructing asexual identities and will reveal the impact of the community's ideologies upon those identities (Chapter 3 provides further justification). In adopting this focus, I

acknowledge that the practices exhibited by AVEN members may not be representative of other asexual individuals and communities. My research therefore explores the construction of AVEN-specific asexual identities. In this sense, I am taking AVEN to represent an 'online community' (a community existing solely within the confines of the forums) rather than a 'community online' (an online faction of a wider community which exists in the 'real world') (Kozinets, 2010). This is because although some AVEN's members may meet offline and may be linked to the wider offline asexual population and, potentially, to offline asexual communities, the AVEN community itself does not have an offline contingent and so only exists as a community in the online setting.

I also acknowledge that AVEN has been the focus of, or source of participants for, a number of previous asexuality studies and, as such, much scholarship on asexuality reflects only this specific context (exceptions include, Cuthbert, 2019; Hille, *et al*., 2020). Exploring other communities therefore has the potential to make asexuality studies more representative. Nevertheless, AVEN is a highly active community with a great deal of influence in disseminating information about asexuality, making it an ideal site for research which is concerned with how a community impacts the identities of its members. Furthermore, in using the CoP framework, this thesis investigates how community members respond to AVEN and in turn influence its structure and ethos; this has not yet been a focus of research into asexual identities. This study will also highlight the value of CoP theory in studying the workings of online communities.

1.2.3 Structure of thesis

This thesis utilises a sociocultural linguistic framework (Section 2.2) to explore identity making and community alignment amongst AVEN's forum members. It draws upon an ethnography of the forums and survey data to consider how individuals construct their identities in relation to each other, the community as a whole and the wider allosexual world. These decisions are detailed in the literature review (Chapter 2) and the methodology (Chapter 3). A more comprehensive overview of the AVEN forums follows in Chapter 4.

My analysis commences in Chapter 5, which investigates the language used to define asexuality and what this tells us about how asexuality is framed in relation to other sexualities

and allonormative expectations. Consideration is also given to sexual and romantic labelling practices within the community. Chapter 6 focuses upon what it means to be a member of the AVEN CoP, considering the structure of the community and interactions therein, and exploring how members discuss topics and position themselves in relation to one another and the community. Also important here is an investigation of how members challenge and defend the community's ethos and practices. Chapter 7 then combines these themes, looking at what it means to be asexual on AVEN. This involves looking beyond the CoP at how community members perceive asexuality's relationship with LGBTQ+ groups and allosexuality as a dominant construct, and what this means for AVEN's collective identity. Key to this is an exploration of coming out which sheds light upon the issues faced when raising awareness of asexuality and searching for acceptance in the allosexual world. Finally, Chapter 8 brings together my findings in a discussion of how the relationship between asexuality and allonormativity influences asexual identities and how asexuality itself challenges the dominance of allonormativity. It also considers what a CoP study of AVEN can tell us about the CoP. These discussions are accompanied by reflections on my methodology, a consideration of topics for future research and some concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

In order to contextualise and justify my study, it is important to begin with a review of the literature in related areas of the field. My research is situated within the traditions and aims of the field of language, gender and sexuality studies and so I start by giving an overview of this discipline (Section 2.1). The themes of identity construction (Section 2.2) and community affiliation (Section 2.3) are also central to this thesis so I outline sociocultural linguistic approaches to them which acknowledge the impact of social norms and ideals. Particular attention is given to social constructionist perspectives of identity construction, notably Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005), and the community of practice as a model for community engagement. Together, these approaches form the basis of my theoretical framework.

2.1 Language, gender and sexuality

As a study which investigates the construction of sexual identities, my research lies firmly within the field of language and sexuality. This is in turn closely connected to language and gender as both fields have a strong focus upon normativity and non-normative gender identities are often interpreted as corresponding to non-normative sexualities – indeed, Motschenbacher states that the study of sexuality 'made the construction of non-normative identities more salient' (2014: 49). I therefore begin with a review of language and gender studies as the initial waves in this area pre-date the development of the language and sexuality field. I then move on to the development of language and sexuality and the importance of queer linguistics.

2.1.1 Language and gender

The earliest linguistic gender studies were politically-motivated mappings of variation between so-called *women's language* and *men's language*. Coates and Pichler (2011) note that this was inspired by the changing socio-political landscape of the 1970s and that studies of this era brought increased awareness and visibility to feminist issues. For instance, Lakoff (1975) considered the language used by women and concluded that the prevalence of features such as hedging, 'empty' adjectives and politeness strategies had the effect of marking

women as weaker and more hesitant than men, demonstrating linguistic gender inequalities. The perceived distinction between the genders was based upon essentialist views that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ were rigid and inherent categories, each with its own set of characteristics, around which society was organised (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Research at that time was also likely to attribute all observed variations to gender and, in doing so, neglected the impact of other intersecting factors such as class, race and the social contexts in which language is produced (Motschenbacher, 2010).

The field began to adopt a more critical stance towards gender variation, questioning the causes and correlations of observed differences. One crucial aim of such studies was to ‘expose gender discrimination and the ways in which language was coerced into the service of the patriarchy’ (Coates and Pichler, 2011: 2). Two approaches developed to explain these patterns of variation – the dominance model and the difference model. The former, characterised by Fishman (1978) and Zimmerman and West (1975), attributed linguistic gender variation to the dominating force of masculinity, with feminine linguistic forms reflecting the subordination of women within society. In contrast, the latter view, most prominently expressed by Tannen (1990), perceived variation to be a result of men and women exhibiting fundamentally different characteristics, potentially as a result of being differently socialised early in life, which then manifested in the language features that each gender used. Both of these approaches emphasised the differences between the two genders and, as a result, often overlooked the differences which exist within each gender group. They were also limited in their inability to accommodate the experiences of individuals identifying outside of the gender binary.

The 1990s ushered in a new approach for language and gender studies, with researchers questioning the stability of the binary gender categories that had, for so long, underpinned research within the field, and viewing gender and sex as socially constructed. Broadly speaking, social constructionism refers to the exploration of concepts which are produced via social and cultural processes (Burr, 2015; Weinberg, 2014; see also Section 2.2). Thus, gender is seen as something which arises through interaction as opposed to being present at its outset; it is performed rather than inherent. Research of this mind-set has therefore been used to investigate the ways in which gendered identities are created through language use in social contexts.

Butler's (2006 [1990) concept of performativity is fundamental to many branches of sociolinguistic identity approaches and is particularly important here. This is because performativity theory suggests that the self is not a concrete object but, rather, is an abstract concept created via drawing upon culturally recognised ideologies. Butler therefore posits that 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (ibid: 34). By this, she means that although gender may at first seem to have a somewhat stable quality, it is, in fact, intangible, created discursively via reference to pre-existing gendered codes, or 'culturally established lines of coherence' (ibid: 33). However, it is not just a case of referencing these codes – the codes themselves need to be adopted in accordance with pre-determined rules and expectations which frame the ways that they may be interpreted and made intelligible. Thus, Butler's argument, which Sullivan (2003: 89) states 'consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer' (emphasis removed), highlights the need to consider the role played by the wider social world and mutually understood norms in shaping the kinds of identities that individuals construct for themselves.

Drawing on Austin's (1975 [1955]) speech act theory, Butler states that 'gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be' (2006 [1990]: 34) and this points to the idea that gender, and identity more broadly, is a 'process of becoming rather than being' (Hall, 1996: 4). In gender studies, this is often called 'doing' gender which Koch describes as the way that 'gender is constructed in social interaction' via 'everyday practices [that are] structured according to cultural norms' (2008: 23). These are often inconspicuous in practice but must be learned and repeated in daily life. It is the common knowledge of what these practices mean that makes them intelligible to those we interact with. Indeed, it is only when normative practices are disrupted (for example, when 'feminine' practices are performed by someone male-bodied) that we are likely to recognise them as constructed.

Barrett's (2011) study of African-American drag queens shows how linguistic performativity can be used in the creation of a gendered self. Barrett observed drag queens drawing upon recognised ideologies, using language stereotypically associated with white women to convey female personae but distorting these by also utilising language practices associated with African-American men. In so doing, they claimed both of the identities, highlighting the

multi-faceted nature of their drag identities, and showed that neither could be said to be inherent. These practices demonstrate the performative nature of drag acts but Barrett's findings also shed light on the ways that identities more generally are constructed performatively, therefore helping to destabilise notions of essentialised characteristics.

Ultimately, performativity theory enables researchers to investigate linguistic gender conformity and deviance via examples of adherence to hegemonic and heteronormative ideals (such as DeFrancisco's, 2011 research into the practices employed by men to silence or control conversations with their female partners in the domestic sphere). It has also shed light upon instances in which these same ideals are challenged and disrupted, as in Bucholtz (1999), in which 'nerd' girls are shown to use strategies such as 'gross' language to highlight their non-compliance with stereotypical femininity. Such studies have helped to show that speakers point to masculinities and femininities in different ways through their use of language. As a result, such works have facilitated a more nuanced understanding of how gender is constructed in different settings and by different individuals and groups, as well as what it means to use particular linguistic features that are typically associated with gendered behaviour.

As language and gender studies have shed light upon the constructed nature of gender identities, so too have they shown that subverting gender norms leads to stigmatisation. As will be discussed in the following section, one way in which this operates is through a close link between gender and sexuality in which failure to conform to an expected gender norm, or the indexing of non-expected gender norms, results in a challenge to that person's sexual identity. Gender and sexuality are therefore concepts which intertwine.

2.1.2 Language and sexuality

As a field in its own right, language and sexuality maintains a close connection with its sister field, with gender issues offering powerful insights into the ways that sexualities are performed and communicated. I begin this section with a consideration of how sexuality is defined within linguistics and the social sciences to understand how these definitions attend to the concept of asexuality. I then proceed to a discussion of the field's development and the adoption of queer linguistics as a key theoretical outlook.

2.1.2.1 Defining sexuality

For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term 'sexuality' synonymously with 'sexual category' – that is, as a term which groups individuals according to common sexual preferences and behaviours. In this sense, then, asexuality is a category which groups together individuals who do not experience sexual attraction.

However, it is also important to recognise that 'sexuality' is a polysemous term which simultaneously encompasses 'sexual desire' (who we are attracted to), 'sexual behaviour' (the sexual acts we engage in) and 'sexual identity' (how we define ourselves as sexual beings). For instance, Baker (2008: 6) states that 'Sexuality refers to the way that people conduct themselves as sexual beings', emphasising behaviour over feelings. Queen's (2014: 204) description serves as an umbrella term for 'sexual identity' and 'eroticism', defined respectively as 'the social framings through which individuals and groups are socially categorized […] based on their sexual orientation, beliefs about their sexuality, and/or their sexual practices' and 'the description or indexing of specifically erotic desires and erotic practices'. These definitions, alongside Weeks' sociological description of sexuality as 'those desires and behaviours which shaped [a person's] sexual (and social) identities' (2011: 198), therefore frame sexual behaviours and desires as *presences* which influence sexual identities. Whilst these definitions do not, at first glance, accommodate asexuality - on account of it being defined in terms of *absence* - they do highlight sexuality as a multi-faceted concept and understanding this is in turn important for understanding what it is that asexual people do not experience (particularly when we consider the multiple and nuanced identities under the asexual umbrella).

However, they also inevitably position the presence of some degree of sexual attraction and sexual activity as the norm. Flore (2014) observes that any sexual experiences which do not fit this model are inevitably cast as dysfunctional and pathologised, leading to the marginalisation of asexuality. Queen's (2014: 204) mentioning of 'sexual practices' as a component of sexual identity is also noteworthy as it contrasts the belief held by many asexuals that it is their lack of desire rather than lack of engagement in sexual activities which makes them asexual (Purdy, 2015).

Although sexual activity is frequently portrayed as a pre-requisite for identifying a sexuality, the term ‘sexual orientation’, often used synonymously, offers a different perspective. Definitions of this term emphasise the role of attraction and desire rather than sexual activity, with Queen (2014: 204) stating that it is ‘a descriptor for the sex and gender of sexual object choices’ and Baker (2008: 6) describing it as an ‘aspect of sexuality’ concerned with ‘the extent to which someone prefers opposite or same sex partners’. Baker’s use of ‘extent’ is useful here as it suggests that orientation lies on a spectrum and so it does not rule out the possibility that an individual may indicate little to no preference towards either option. However, Baker’s definition does not accommodate the orientations of those outside the gender binary; this is particularly problematic for the asexual community, which exhibits a high incidence of transgender and non-binary individuals (Ace Community Survey, 2022).

It is telling that, outside of specifically asexual contexts, sexual and romantic orientations are not commonly distinguished and this is indicative of a tendency to conflate the two under sexual orientation. Indeed, this is a logical conflation for many sexualities as ‘usually both orientations are aligned and match’ (AVEN wiki, 2022); in the case of asexuals, however, ‘it is common to find mixed combinations of romantic and sexual orientations’ (ibid) and so this conflation is more problematic. I therefore advocate consideration of these different orientation types within language and sexuality studies.

Cerankowski also touches on this theme in stating that ‘the concept of asexuality often becomes subsumed by the language of sexual desire, a language system so structured around sex that it limits the ways in which asexuality can be talked about and understood’ (2014: 145). Cerankowski’s problematisation of sexual discourses raises questions about how asexuality is framed and perceived; I explore these ideas via my first and second research questions.

It seems that asexuality’s perceived validity as a sexuality is dependent upon the degree to which sexuality is defined in terms of sexual activity and/or attraction to others. This is also dependent, to some degree, upon the extent to which sexuality is conceived as an inherent aspect of human behaviour and personal identity. As an example of how asexual people view this issue, Scherrer’s (2008) research on how self-identified asexuals understand their own identities found that asexuality gives meaning to people’s lives and that they view it as an

innate and essential part of themselves. Thus, if we acknowledge sexuality to be intrinsic then to claim that asexuality is not a sexuality is to remove a significant aspect of an asexual person's humanity. As such, the implications of this debate need to be considered carefully as it risks invalidating asexual identities.

Decker (2014: 5) captures the different perspectives that asexuals have on this issue in her statement 'Some asexual people prefer to see asexuality as a lack of sexual orientation […] but many prefer to say that their sexual orientation is, simply, attraction to no-one', shifting the focus from the attraction itself to the objects of that attraction. I would argue, then, that it is important to explore the views of the asexual community itself to see which descriptions are important to those most affected by them. This is something for which a linguistic analysis is particularly well suited due to the close attention paid to the nuances of language use. Thus, awareness of these issues factored into the formation of my research aims (Section 1.2.1) and my approach to research design (Section 3.1).

2.1.2.2 The development of the language and sexuality field

Having considered how sexuality is defined within the field, it is now necessary to look at the development of the field of language and sexuality. The earliest works on language and sexuality produced lists of words that were deemed to constitute a gay or lesbian 'argot' (see Levon and Mendes, 2016), and were predominantly concerned with putting lesbian and gay speakers onto the linguistic map. Following Chesebro's (1981) work, which sought to situate lesbian and gay language use within a broader theoretical framework, a further development brought a greater focus to communication systems. However, although the work of Chesebro and his contemporaries made significant inroads into more systematic and theoretically minded methodologies, their work relied upon two assumptions: 1) that a gay/lesbian community existed and that being a member of such a community constituted a gay/lesbian identity and 2) that having a gay/lesbian identity resulted in the use of distinctive linguistic practices. These assumptions underpinned much sociolinguistic research into sexuality at this time (for example, Day and Morse, 1981; Gaudio, 1994; Leap, 1996; Moonwomon, 1985), but further developments in the field began to challenge both their accuracy and their centrality to sexuality studies.

One such development is the inclusion of research on heterosexualities. Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013) state that this means that heterosexualities are now also positioned as constructed identities, challenging previous assumptions that non-heterosexual identities were formed via marked discourses in contrast to the normalised standard of heterosexuality. In her study of heterosexual masculinity amongst a group of male friends, for instance, Cameron (1997) shows how individual participants asserted their identities by taking or relinquishing the floor and by threatening or supporting each other's face needs – that is, 'the positive self-image or self-esteem that a person enjoys as a reflection of that person's estimation by others' (Leech, 2014: 25). Through considering practices such as interruption and gossip, and looking at the ways that the group as a whole accommodated these acts, Cameron shows how the group created and maintained its image of heterosexual masculinity.

Kiesling (2011) also focuses on performances of male heterosexuality, this time in a fraternity group. He found that many of the men evaluated women as sexual objects in the context of discussions amongst friends but, in an interview with one participant, he discovered that this student was in a long-term relationship and seemed happy to settle down with his girlfriend. Kiesling notes that this participant had started the interview denying any intention to get married, as he might have done amongst the fraternity group, but, as he became more familiar with Kiesling over the course of the interview, he admitted that marriage may not have been as distant as he had first suggested. On account of this discrepancy, Kiesling concludes that his participant was unsure about how to construct his sexuality in the context of the interview and, as a result, his self-positioning changed, indicating that the participant's perception of the context was important to his identity construction.

Research into heterosexualities has also brought to light the fact that specific types of heterosexuality are idealised, for example relationships where the man is slightly older than the woman (Baker, 2008). Deviating from these expectations has been shown to lead to similar processes of stigmatisation and exclusion as non-heterosexuality. For example, Coates (2013) notes an example of a female interactant rejecting the idea of having children and, in so doing, positioning herself as not only being gender deviant (by not wishing to fulfil the typically female-associated role of nurturing and caring for children) but also of subverting the heterosexual norm of entering into a reproductive relationship. Similarly, Coates cites an

example in which a teenage boy used a high-pitched tone to discuss a poem with a group of friends in a classroom. In this case, the boy's decision to focus on his work and to adopt a more stereotypically feminine speech style marked him out to his friends as not only gender deviant but also, by virtue, deviant in terms of his sexuality too. This was most clearly indicated in the accusation that he was behaving 'like a queer' (2013: 545-546). Coates views such examples as indicative of a heterosexual hierarchy, in which particular types of heterosexuality (those deemed more traditional) are prioritised over those which challenge the dominancy of them. This is in turn relevant to my study as this hierarchy is also applied to asexual individuals whose non-compliance often leads to their marginalisation, as shown by Sundrud's (2011) study of asexual narratives in which the influence of heteronormative expectations upon asexual identities is illustrated.

This discussion has illustrated the development of a focus upon normativity which will be discussed further below. Further, the inclusion of studies of heterosexuality alongside studies of sexual minorities not only highlights the relative paucity of asexuality research within the language and sexuality field but also paves the way for its inclusion going forwards.

2.1.2.3 Queer theory and queer linguistics

Another important development is an adoption of queer linguistics – that is, a queer theoretical approach utilising linguistic analysis – which has offered new analytical potential. Queer theory developed in the early 1990s as an academic response to issues raised by the lesbian and gay liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Instigated by Butler's (2006 [1990]) work, queer theory has, at its heart, the aim to challenge heteronormative ideals and to disrupt heteronormativity, or the 'mechanisms that lead to heterosexuality being perceived as the naturalised norm' (Motschenbacher, 2010: 11). Koch describes heteronormativity as 'the structural, political and cultural effects of heterosexuality as preferred norm and privileged form of social organization' (2008: 25). Thus, it is the source of the hegemonic narratives, ideals and expectations which shape and regulate the genders that people perform, as well as their sexualities and other identifying characteristics. It is a powerful social and cultural force, one critiqued by queer theory on the grounds that these regulated categorisations are socially constructed and exclude any identity categories which do not conform to them. Queer theory therefore locates heteronormative discourses and questions

their validity and pervasiveness, ultimately seeking 'the reconceptualisation of dominant discourses' (Motschenbacher, 2010: 11). Koch adds that it is a 'critical approach to analys[ing] structures of power and oppression' (2008: 20) which 'questions any normed identities' (Koch, 2008: 29). It therefore has the potential to challenge *all* preconceived and hegemonic ideals – not just sexuality and gender – and can shed light upon a range of societal inequalities.

Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013: 520) posit that queer theory is more accurately referred to in the multiple, as a collection of heterogeneous approaches with a common 'critical focus on heterosexuality'. They describe queer theory as 'a critical (anti-)paradigm that fights against categories and aims at a blurring of categorical boundaries' (2013: 521; also Leap, 2015), highlighting its disruptive tendencies and potential for supporting activism and social change.

Although heteronormativity is the normative stance most frequently targeted by queer theory, queer studies also facilitate analysis of homonormativities – that is, an idealised form of homosexuality. Research into homonormativity has highlighted instances of privilege in gay and lesbian communities which can be seen to parallel the privileging of heterosexuality more generally. For example, Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013: 525) distinguish between homonormativities which create 'new (questionable) normativities' (those which prioritise non-assimilationist stances) and those which adopt heteronormative ideals and apply them to the homosexual context (for example, where same-sex marriage is viewed as preferable to civil partnerships). They warn that research into homonormativity can often be limited by a focus upon anti-assimilationist gay and lesbian experiences.

On this theme, concerns exist that queer theory has become redundant and lost its radical edge. Hall, for example, questions its ability to truly disrupt heteronormative ideals, stating that for something to be queer, it must 'trouble the regime of heteronormativity' (2013: 638), yet queer often unwittingly reifies heterosexuality as normative. Halperin (2003) laments what he sees as the 'normalisation' of queer theory, arguing that it has become institutionalised, gaining recognition and acceptance from the academy in the form of jobs and academic respectability. This, he claims, has led it to lose its potency and cease to provide disruptive promise. Penney (2014: 68), too, criticises it as a 'bourgeois' concept, restricted to use in academia, which focuses upon normative sexualities of little relevance to

the lives of those who do not fit the ‘hegemonic framework of queer theory’ and Kross (2014: 4) states that queer theory ‘has not significantly impacted our daily lives’. I argue that queer theory’s primary purpose is as an academic tool of critical interrogation, impacting upon real-world contexts by enabling researchers to question and disrupt societal beliefs and illuminate practices marginalising minority groups and reinforcing normativities. It is through identifying and drawing attention to these practices that they can be challenged in real-world activism.

Increasing the application of queer theory to a wider variety of contexts, experiences and communities is one means of facilitating this revolutionary power. Thus, sociolinguistic studies exploring queer theory’s effectiveness outside of Western contexts (such as Maree, 2016; McCormick, 2003; Rudwick and Msibi, 2016), arguing for its adaptation to different cultural settings, are important. Like Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013), Namaste (1994: 229) also calls for an expansion of the ‘current borders of gay and lesbian communities’, arguing that the recognition of sexualities and genders from beyond the heterosexual/homosexual binary could displace the binary itself and the consequential relationship that exists between the two poles. In this vein, Namaste suggests that ‘If heterosexuality is something which is taken for granted, and if the adoption of a homosexual identity only serves to bolster the strength of heterosexuality, then perhaps the most effective sites of resistance are those created by people who refuse both options’ (1994: 230).

Here, then, we see that asexuality has some potential and its aptitude for challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality and normativity has been addressed within the asexual literature. For example, Cerankowski and Milks (2010) posit that asexual studies have the ability to contribute to debates about what constitutes queer and who can and should be considered queer under this rubric. Likewise, Gressgård claims that asexuality acts as a ‘disturbing element in the fabric of society’ by ‘decentring the human from sexuality’ (2013: 188; also Bozdoğan, 2012), and Przybylo (2011) argues that asexuality has the ability to act as a counterweight to sexual society and may transform perceptions of what is considered the norm. Thus, it is clear that studies of asexuality have the potential to offer new insights to queer theory and prevent its stagnation.

Despite its current shortcomings, then, queer theory provides the tools for questioning the ideological practices which are frequently held to be biological truths, disrupting and showing them to be unstable and socially constructed. Queer theory therefore operates with a political focus, locating sites and sources of inequality and illuminating them so that they may become less pervasive. This is an important focus for this thesis and so a queer perspective will be incorporated into my theoretical framework in the form of queer linguistics. Although queer theory has a wide scope for being applied to a number of different disciplines, its reliance upon discursive constructions of identity categories and the fact that language is the primary site 'through which the work of normativity and regulatory control unfold in everyday life' (Leap, 2013: 48) means that it can be said to have a 'special affinity with linguistics' (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013: 21).

Leap (2018: 661) describes queer linguistics as a means of exploring the ways that language use refers to normative ideologies and 'lends authority to categories of sexual identity and [...] binaries'. For example, in his study of dating profiles on a South African gay dating website, Milani (2013) observes patterns of language use which indicated a widespread preference for heteronormative masculinities in both the desired partner's characteristics and the writer's presentation of self. Adjectives such as 'straight acting', 'strong' and 'normal' in proximity to 'guy' and 'man' demonstrate a preoccupation with traits commonly associated with heterosexual masculinity. More feminine traits and identifiers were rejected and negated. Milani concludes that the practice of normalising and appreciating heterosexual ideals within this same-sex context was common, with his participants attempting to subvert stereotypes of gay male effeminacy by aligning themselves with more masculine practices. In a similar study, Bogetić (2009) argued that such practices enable the continued marginalisation of homosexual culture. On the other hand, Leap (2011) found that a gay interviewee in South Africa used his experiences of prejudice in his hometown to assess his experiences of gay culture in a city environment and, in so doing, disrupted his own perceptions of the normative ideologies associated with each setting. Thus he destabilised heteronormative ideals by removing heterosexuality as the baseline against which he understood his homosexual experiences.

These studies show that queer linguistics problematises all identity categories which 'normatively regulate and exclude those who do not fully meet their normative requirements'

(Motschenbacher, 2010: 10). In this sense, queer approaches to language and sexuality enable researchers to deconstruct identity categories and acknowledge them as both heterogeneous and restrictive. This is something which Fallon (2015) argues is important in the study of asexuality as a way to avoid taking an anormative[5] stance which fails to recognise the heterogeneity of the asexual population.

Building upon the work of Milani (2013), Bogetić (2009) and Leap (2011), this thesis looks at the internalisation of allosexual norms and their impact upon asexual identities and culture. This therefore links with Carrigan's (2012) sociological findings that societal expectations of sexual desire obscure asexuality from the public consciousness and create the social discrimination that many asexuals report. Thus, this thesis will use a queer linguistic approach to offer additional insights on this established theme in asexuality research and to add asexuality and allonormativity to the queer linguistic repertoire.

Whilst queer linguistics enables the study of marginalisation and power relations, it must be supplemented with other theoretical approaches to create an analytical framework. Motschenbacher advocates for 'queer-oriented sociolinguistics' (2010: 25) which questions essentialist and pre-defined identity categories via investigating the indexical relationship between linguistic signs and identity categories. Looking at how these links come to be, and how their adoption in particular contexts influences an individual's identification with particular categories, helps to identify normative structures within society and its linguistic landscape and can disrupt pre-conceived notions of normality. Podesva's (2007) study of a gay man's varying uses of falsetto voice in different professional and casual contexts is a good example of this, showing how the individual used the stereotypes associated with falsetto to index a fun persona with friends and yet avoided doing so at work. However, as linguistic stereotypes for asexuality are not yet established, this method would be difficult to implement in the current study.

Sauntson (2008) suggests the use of Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2005; discussed in Section 2.2) 'tactics of intersubjectivity' (ToI), a model which uses three dichotomous categories

[5] Although sometimes used to mean 'not normative' (see, for example, Denton, 2012), 'anormative' is often used in asexual circles to refer to normative expectations of asexuality and asexuals, or to the idea that some types of asexuality are privileged over others.

(*adequation* and *distinction*, *authentication* and *denaturalisation* and *authorisation* and *illegitimation*) as ‘analytic tools to call attention to salient aspects of the discourse situation’ (ibid: 493). This model provides a useful means of interrogating the impact of power relations and positionality upon the intelligibility and availability of identities in specific contexts (as shown in Jones, 2012; Sauntson and Morrish, 2012). This in turn corresponds to my research aims and so this approach is integrated into my theoretical framework.

2.1.3 Summary

As a discipline, then, language, gender and sexuality has enabled the exploration of the linguistic practices and identity construction of both homosexual and heterosexual people. Likewise, queer approaches have furthered understandings of how members of each category interact with the expectations of the societies in which they live and the groups with whom they communicate. These findings have also offered some important insights into the influence of normativities and, in so doing, have enabled us to begin to challenge their pervasiveness and stability the ideologies which currently influence the structure of society.

Contrary to the views of Halperin (2003), Penney (2014) and Kross (2014), the above discussion has shown that queer theory is not an outdated concept which has become unfashionable and ‘fatigued’, has lost its way and become disconnected from earlier iterations (Halberstam, 2003). Indeed, Halberstam posits that queer theory has actually undergone a ‘paradigm shift’ (ibid: 361), incorporating a more multidisciplinary approach and exploiting its position outside of traditional disciplinary and departmental boundaries to enable it to better challenge pre-existing concepts of identity. These practices have helped to move queer research beyond academia and towards greater interaction with public and non-specialist contexts which supports Jackson’s (2009) belief that queer theory’s future lies in its ability to adapt to new contexts. These points similarly apply to queer linguistics.

There is, however, a great deal more research which needs to be done about other minority sexualities in order to give us a more thorough understanding of how they are experienced and negotiated within social situations. Indeed, as Thorne (2013: 95) suggests, the continued exploration of these developing areas is a worthwhile endeavour as it holds the potential to

push the boundaries of existing queer perspectives and to 'add depth and breadth' to the discipline. I therefore envision that studies such as this one, which bring increased focus to other sexual identities, will help to offer renewed potential to queer linguistics going forwards.

Having explored the field in which my research sits and having considered how asexuality relates to other sexualities already studied within it, I turn now to an examination of linguistic approaches to studying identity.

2.2 Linguistic approaches to identity construction

As has been indicated, the concept of identity is focal to my research. De Fina (2006: 263) views identity as a means of 'conveying to one another what kind of people we are' and Norton (2013: 4) states that identity refers to 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, [and] how that relationship is constructed across time and space'. In sociology, Lawler describes identities as assemblages of 'various memories, experiences, episodes' (2014: 24) to show 'how we come to be the way we are' (2014: 26). These conceptualisations highlight the processual nature of identity as the way in which we come to comprehend ourselves and our place within society and through which we show others who we believe we are, as well as who we are not (Baker, 2008; Jenkins, 2014).

The study of identity has been approached by linguists in a number of ways. As my research is interested in the ways in which identity is constructed and performed in a particular social setting, I adopt a sociocultural approach for my analysis. Sociocultural linguistics developed as a way of bringing together linguistic, anthropological and sociological concerns in order to investigate how language is used in its sociocultural context (as discussed in Hodges, 2015; Bucholtz and Hall, 2008). There is considerable overlap between this discipline and sociolinguistics, which Coupland (2016) believes is made richer by links between its own 'home-grown' theories and related theories in neighbouring disciplines and subject areas. However, where the latter has a greater focus upon variationism – that is, structural changes and variations which occur within language varieties – sociocultural linguistics draws upon interactionist theories to explore interactional elements of language use and the specific social and cultural contexts in which that language is used. My own approach therefore uses social constructionist and interactional sociolinguistic theories (discussed further below) but I will

also consider the influence of the essentialist and variationist approaches from which they have arisen.

As in studies of language and gender, essentialism was one of the earliest approaches taken towards identity research and it views identity as something inherent to the individual – that is, something biologically or culturally determined and which is stable and unchanging over the individual's lifespan (Walton and Banaji, 2004). Proponents of this stance take for granted that 'those who occupy an identity category […] are both fundamentally similar to one another and fundamentally different from members of other groups' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004b: 374), suggesting that categories are homogenous and distinct from one another. In terms of the relation between language and identity, essentialism assumes that identity shapes language use (Bucholtz, 2003) and, thus, linguistic studies of identity which adopt this perspective take pre-determined identity categories as the cause of linguistic variation (for example, Lakoff's, 1975, work on features of women's language and Leap's, 1996, research on gay men's English).

For some researchers this has served the function of bringing little-studied and marginalised groups to the fore, allowing them to be framed as homogeneous and cohesive (a practice which Spivak, 1996, calls 'strategic essentialism'), and enabling the foundations of new strands of research. However, this approach has also been criticised. Reasons given include that it does not adequately acknowledge variation within categories or individuals (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a); that it suppresses in-group differences, resulting in 'not merely stereotyping but either pathologising or wrongly idealising' group identities (Sayer, 1997: 454); and that it problematically prioritises researcher-determined identity categories over those salient to the language users under study (Bucholtz, 1999). Kim (2013) also points out that simplifying groups of people into essentialised categories for the sake of looking at the bigger picture can cause misconstruals of identities and stagnation of the analysis by preventing researchers from seeing variations within communities. Further, Kim cautions that essentialism can render some group members 'invisible and eliminated' (2013: 27), something which creates normativities and marginalises subsections of a community. This is therefore particularly problematic for research, such as my own, which aims to study communities objectively.

In contrast, variationism places more focus upon intracommunity variation, recognising the heterogeneity of communities and allowing variation to be studied as an influence upon identities. These perspectives assume that variation in language use does not happen randomly but instead occurs systematically. Variationism therefore explores 'systematic and inherent variation in language, both in the present (synchrony) and in the past (diachrony)' (Tagliamonte, 2012: xiv), asking 'how linguistic structures and patterns of use are shaped by, and themselves shape, interaction' (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2001: 1). As my own research is not concerned with identifying variables in the language use of my participants, I do not utilise a variationist approach to my data.

Nevertheless, variationist approaches have influenced the development of sociocultural linguistics, emphasising the importance of looking at locally salient meanings and variation within communities. Key to this is the concept of social constructionism (defined in Section 2.1.1), a non-essentialist theoretical mindset which views identity as something emerging from social interaction rather than preceding it (discussed in Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a). Instances of interaction are therefore important sites for observing the construction of identity and interactional sociolinguistics (which Schiffrin (1994: 105) describes as being comprised of two central issues: 'the interaction between self and other, and context') facilitates the study of such data.

As the formative text for interactional sociolinguistic theory, Gumperz (1982a) showed how speakers utilise contextualised cues to convey and interpret meaning. He also showed that instances of cross-cultural communication can illustrate the issues which may arise when participants in an interaction are subject to different frames of reference and these ideas were developed further by Tannen (1984). In essence, interactional sociolinguistics posits that meaning is not always explicit in the words that speakers use in interactions and that 'because of the incompleteness of talk, all language users must rely on extracommunicative knowledge to infer […] how what is said relates to the situation at hand and what a speaker possibly intends to convey by saying it' (Jaspers, 2011: 135). Misunderstandings can arise when speakers with different cultural knowledge find that their interpretations of language within an interaction do not match (Gumperz, 1982a; Tannen, 1984) and so interactional sociolinguists seek to study the interpretation and function of language forms with respect to the social and cultural contexts of their use (Günthner, 2008).

In this sense, Jaspers cites the ability of interactional sociolinguistics to shed light upon the links between specific interactional moments and the wider cultural discourse practices that individuals draw upon. Thus, he claims, interactional sociolinguistics provides the ideal tools for recognising that 'communication can never be taken for granted but always involves collaboration, collusion and negotiation' (2011: 144). Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 586) also acknowledge the importance of interaction in conceptualisations of identity, stating that 'it is in interaction that all [linguistic resources] gain social meaning'. In this sense, interactional sociolinguistics views language as a 'fundamentally situated social phenomenon' which accomplishes social actions (Barth-Weingarten, 2008: 80).

This links to the social construction of identity in that identity is recognised as a bridge between the 'micro level of the individual and the macro level of the social order' (Preece, 2016: 3) and Baker (2008: 11) describes it as 'an adoption of socially imposed, or socially-constructed roles'. Thus, we see that identities are not formed in a vacuum but, rather, that they develop in relation to existing socially-constructed ideals and expectations.

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller draw on the use of socially marked language in proposing their 'acts of identity' framework which views linguistic behaviour as 'a series of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles' (1985: 14) via choosing to associate with or dissociate from the language varieties available in a social setting. Variation is considered the norm and speakers are surrounded by socially-marked linguistic choices which they can use to identify social groups and, through adopting those linguistic features into their own language use, can project an identity in line with some of those groups and in opposition to others. It is therefore a means of considering active choice making in processes of identification in which speakers appeal to established community norms for language use by adopting such variants into their own speech styles. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller focus on multilingual communities who converse using 'complex mixtures of language and dialects' (Coupland, 2010: 109), but they suggest that their theory also has wider applicability to other types of linguistic development. However, AVEN does not feature prominent language varieties and so Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's framework is of less use to this thesis. However, AVEN does make use of key community practices and so a framework which offers similar tools with an emphasis on practice is more useful.

As identity practices draw upon social codes, they are specific to individual cultures, times and contexts and they 'must *always* be established' (Jenkins, 2014: 18, original emphasis) in a continuous process perhaps more accurately referred to as 'identification' (2014: 7). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) five 'principles of identity' provide a useful framework for understanding such a process and so prove instrumental to my theoretical framework. The five principles are:

- emergence (which views identity as the emergent product of linguistic practices);
- positionality (the idea that identities are made up of 'macro-level demographic categories' and temporary roles specific to individual interactional contexts);
- indexicality (concerned with the mechanism through which identity is created, namely the link between particular linguistic forms and their social meanings);
- relationality (the idea that identities acquire meaning in relation to other identity categories and social actors);
- partialness (the idea that identity performances at a given time can only ever be a partial representation of the many identities that an individual adopts).

Using these principles to guide my analysis of identity practices within AVEN encourages and facilitates a focus on asexuality as a part of wider society, bringing to the fore the social contexts in which identities are constructed. This allows me to conceive of asexual identities as emerging from engagement with the AVEN forums via processes of negotiation and interaction; Barrett's (2011) research on the emergent identities of drag queens is a good example of this principle in action. Meanwhile, the positionality principle enables me to consider the ways in which individuals, and the AVEN forums as a whole, position themselves in particular interactions within the context of the forums, as well as more generally. In this sense, positionality concerns temporary roles adopted in specific moments of interaction and wider identity categories which are drawn upon to signify affiliation. These principles will be discussed further throughout the thesis.

Indexicality involves the utilisation of linguistic signs (or 'indexes') which connect a particular interactive context to wider, culturally-salient discourses to communicate meaning. There are two overlapping models for indexical language use, notably Ochs' (1990) two level model of direct and indirect indexicality and Silverstein's (2003) 'orders of indexicality'

which conceives of ‘extended chains of indirect indexicality’ (Snell, 2017: 5). I favour Ochs’ model which states that linguistic features used in a moment of interaction directly index a particular stance. Such stances are fleeting in that they are tied to the particular interactional context but they also indirectly link to broader and more stable social categories, such as sexuality. This is hierarchical, in that the direct link must be made in order for the indirect link to occur, but it results in language users being able to link their own identities in particular interactions to these wider categories. Hall’s (1996) research on hijras offers an example as she concludes that it is not hijra practices themselves which make others fear them; rather, it is the indexical association of those practices with an identity that is marginalised and excluded from everyday society which provokes fear.

With the relationality principle, I am able to assess the ways that individuals and the community relate their asexual identities to one another and to the wider sexual world, particularly to allosexual and LGBTQ+ groups, in terms of oppositionality, solidarity and shared or differing experiences. This is something that Fine (2019) touched on in her analysis of an interview with a homoromantic greysexual man, noting that he related his experiences of asexuality to societal values. I therefore seek to extend upon Fine’s findings by looking at patterns of relationality across the AVEN forums.

Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a; 2005) aforementioned ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ (ToI) exemplify the ways in which identity construction is facilitated by interaction and relationality. They favour the use of ‘intersubjectivity’ over ‘identity’ because it highlights the ‘bivalency of social identification’ (2004a: 493) – that is, that the individual can be both the subject of and subject to social processes in the course of interactions – and therefore emphasises that identification is a relational process. The framework is composed of three pairs of tactics: adequation and distinction (concerning the construction of identity along lines of sameness and difference), authentication and denaturalisation (which concerns the realness or artifice of identifications) and authorisation and illegitimation (which is concerned with issues of power). Combined, these tactics allow researchers to investigate the ways that interlocutors co-construct identities and consider the structures of power which impact upon such processes (for example, Jones, 2012; Sauntson and Morrish, 2012). This too forms part of my theoretical framework and the tactics themselves are discussed in more detail throughout the thesis.

It is also worth noting Baker's assertion that 'we have *identities* made up of many different and interacting components' (2008: 11, original italics). This links to the partialness principle and points to the idea that identities are not singular but multiple and overlapping and that at any one time, the individual is likely to only demonstrate a fraction of the many identities they construct. It is important to be aware of this partial presentation of identity but my own analysis will not focus upon this idea. This is because the online setting of my research site makes it difficult to determine the different identities that a person adopts and so it will not be possible to consistently identify people or to guarantee that their self-presentation is authentic. Thus, intersectionality is not a prominent feature of my analysis.

2.2.1 Summary

It has been demonstrated above that social constructionism dominates linguistic identity research today and is also the most fitting perspective for the current project. Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity and tactics of intersubjectivity therefore frame an investigation of the ways that my participants construct their identities in relation to the social contexts in which they operate. I also look at how AVEN members interact with one another and the influence that has upon how they perform their identities.

As has been suggested, identities do not occur in isolation but, rather, in conjunction with the social settings in which they are produced. Context is therefore important to understanding identity construction. The communities with which individuals associate are an important part of this, particularly in light of my third and fourth research questions which seek to explore the role the AVEN community plays in the identities of its members. I therefore now turn to a review of community literature.

2.3 Sociolinguistic concepts of community

Communities are intrinsically linked to the concept of identities. They are important settings in which identities are forged and they inevitably exert an influence upon the types of identities that are permissible and intelligible to community members. Writing from a sociological viewpoint, Weeks (2011: 187) affirms that identities can 'provide a sense of

security but may also be divisive'. This shows the potential for identity to bring individuals together, and for communities to foster a sense of belonging, whilst also indicating the tensions that may arise between groups holding different social outlooks. This ties in with Preece's (2016: 2) argument that 'identity only becomes an issue when the person's sense of belonging is disrupted'; hence we see that identity is not only important to how individuals position themselves in relation to their communities but also to the ways that communities position themselves in relation to one another.

This is particularly relevant to RQ3 which seeks to uncover the means by which a mutual group identity is constructed by and between AVEN members, emphasising the ways that members negotiate different views and experiences. What follows is an exploration of sociolinguistic concepts of community, with particular emphasis upon the concept of communities of practice (Section 2.3.1) which will form another major part of my theoretical framework. I will then look at situating communities in relation to the wider world (Section 2.3.2) and will also consider a new wave of studies into online communities (Section 2.3.3).

Perhaps the earliest concept put forwards for the study of communities within sociolinguistics was that of speech communities. Speech communities are groups of speakers with shared norms for the ways that they use language (Gumperz, 1982b) and, as Morgan (2004: 3) states, the meaning-making which occurs within speech communities is a result of the 'prolonged interaction among those who operate within shared belief and value systems regarding their own culture, society, and history'. Speech communities are typically determined by the researcher on the basis of shared characteristics such as locality or socioeconomic class and herein lies the reason for one of the biggest criticisms of this approach – that it privileges the researcher's perspective and pays little attention to the views of the people involved in the community itself (Bucholtz, 1999). Thus, speech community research represents a top-down approach which restricts the researcher's ability to access key insights which may be gained by considering the nuanced and informed perspectives of community members.

Studies of speech communities fall under two key approaches. The first is interactionist which focuses upon the ways that meaning is generated within interactional contexts (Gumperz, 1982b). Hymes' (1964) work on ethnographies of communication ties in with this approach through its emphasis upon communicative competence – that is, 'the knowledge a

speaker must have to function as a member of a social group' (Morgan, 2004: 8). The second approach is variationist and is concerned with the linguistic variants available to speakers and the ways that different groups of speakers utilise them (Tagliamonte, 2012). Labov's (1963) work on Martha's Vineyard is a notable example as he found that island residents who used the non-standard, Vineyard pronunciation of the [aw] and [ay] diphthongs most heavily were those who rejected the values of the mainland community and wished to align themselves with an islander identity. These studies and approaches show that the speech community concept offers a means of determining how language is used to construct relationships and identity, as well as studying linguistic features as 'stable indicators' of community membership (Morgan, 2004).

Although the concept does not restrict the application of speech communities to those defined by geographical location or population, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) found that, in practice, sociolinguists tend to define speech communities according to these two factors. They also found that observed differences between speakers within these communities were commonly attributed to 'abstracted characteristics – sex, age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity' (1992: 7). They problematise these habits for not recognising the role of practice in 'delineating speech communities and more generally in mediating the relation between language, society, and consciousness' (ibid). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet therefore highlight the need for the role of practices (defined by Eckert (2005: 16) as 'ways of doing things') to be considered alongside the linguistic and social functions of speech community membership.

Further, although the speech communities concept had been sufficient for investigating the rules of language use associated with particular groups of people, it also became clear that this model lacked the ability to consider the impact of social relations between group members. It also insufficiently accounted for the differences between speakers within the community (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Thus another model was required to adequately factor in these differences.

Introduced by Milroy (1987), social network theory enables greater focus upon inter-community relationships by mapping the social networks of participants. It illustrates the different ways in which members of the speech community engage with one another and the strengths of the bonds between them. Through using this approach in her study of working-

class communities in Belfast, Milroy was able to assess the correlation between the number and strength of the bonds between community members and the linguistic features which they used. She observed members of the community with stronger community connections (what Milroy terms higher 'network strength scores') tending to use more of the non-standard varieties associated with the community.

Whilst social network theory therefore addressed some of the concerns that Eckert and McConnell-Ginet later raised about speech community theory, it still fell short in terms of recognising the role of practice within communities. According to Davies (2005: 560), the issue is that the links within social networks are 'essentially *structural* rather than based on practice' (original emphasis) and that 'social network analysis is based almost solely on linguistic variation, rather than seeing linguistic variation as one part of the network practice'. These points suggest that social network theory can only show part of the picture when it comes to the construction of identity and links within the community.

2.3.1 Communities of practice

In response to these issues, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) proposed the use of a community of practice (CoP) approach. First theorised by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a theory of learning in business contexts, and later adopted into sociolinguistics for use in language and gender studies, CoPs are defined as groups of people who come together to fulfil a common endeavour. They are communities structured around social engagement rather than by the locations in which they form or the populations with which they are formed (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992).

Wenger (1998) outlines three dimensions which, together, constitute a CoP. The first, *mutual engagement*, concerns the collective participation of community members in the activities, processes and other practices which bring them together, as well as the ways in which they negotiate a shared sense of meaning in relation to them. The second dimension, *a joint enterprise*, is the shared goals that community members seek to achieve through their mutual engagement and their collectively negotiated means of achieving them. In this sense, it is important to note that CoP members do not come together with the primary aim of participating in a CoP. Rather, they come together to fulfil their roles in relation to the

community (for example, school classes come together to learn and members of an online forum join to discuss their shared interests). Thus, the shared endeavour in which these community members engage is the main purpose for which they come together and the CoP is a result of this participation. There may also be multiple shared endeavours and, as researchers, we need to consider the ways that individual members gravitate towards them. This is particularly relevant to my own research due to AVEN's stated purposes of sharing information, raising awareness about asexuality and socialising with other, like-minded individuals.

The final dimension, *a shared repertoire*, is the resources used by the community in pursuit of their joint enterprise and in the course of their mutual engagement. These include 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions [and] concepts' (Wenger, 1998: 83) and are developed over the course of the community's existence and incorporated into its practices.

Expanding upon the definition of 'practice' given above, I also find Wenger's (1998: 51) parsing of it as 'a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful' to be a helpful reminder of the role of practice in the construction of meaning within communities. In this sense, Eckert and Wenger (2005: 583) also state that 'A practice is a way of doing things, *as grounded in and shared by a community*' (original emphasis). Finally, Wenger (1998: 47) notes that practices 'may never be articulated' and yet the knowledge and correct usage of them are 'unmistakeable signs of membership' in the community of practice.

The CoP framework is therefore a useful approach for analysing and understanding the AVEN community and so I now consider its insights on the concepts of membership and legitimacy.

2.3.1.1 Membership and legitimacy

Unlike the speech community model, CoPs allow researchers to better explore the impact of social contexts upon identity practices by shedding light upon the performance of identity and

the challenges that members pose to community norms (Bucholtz, 1999). As such, CoPs are particularly well suited to the study of group membership.

There are three distinct types of participation within CoPs – full, peripheral and marginal – and these reflect the degree of engagement with community practices (Wenger, 1998). Full participants are those who maintain their community membership by way of continuously participating in community practices. By contrast, both peripheral and marginal participants only partially engage – it is their minimal or non-participation in some practices which prevents them from being full participants (Wenger, 1998). They are differentiated by the prospect that each has for achieving full participation. For peripheral participants, their non-participation may be viewed as an opportunity to learn more about community practices and they are therefore likely to be on an inbound trajectory towards full membership, or otherwise maintain their peripheral status. Alternatively, marginal members are those for whom learning and progression is not an option, because either personal unwillingness or community boundaries inhibit further development. As an example, Wenger (1998) refers to the so-called 'glass ceiling' which can hinder female employees from advancing into high-ranking jobs within male-dominated industries. For such individuals, non-participation is a barrier to achieving full membership and they are destined to maintain their marginal membership, by remaining hindered from participating further, or will leave the community altogether.

Jones' study of a lesbian walking group provides an example of peripherality with a newcomer to the group who 'took a joke about the "nipple cap" of her water bottle too far' (2012: 18). In doing so, this member contravened the group's practice of being polite and avoiding crude language. Jones notes that, on this occasion, the newcomer's attempt at humour was met with a raised eyebrow, a sign it was not accepted by the rest of the group and an example of an act which put the newcomer in their place.

Similarly, Bucholtz's (1999) nerd girls study shows one participant, Carrie, using the word 'bootsy' (a slang term commonly associated with the group's 'cooler' peers which Bucholtz notes the nerd group did not use itself). Bucholtz attributes Carrie's use of the word to the fact that she held multi-membership with other, cooler groups and this contributed to her holding peripheral membership with the nerd group. The other group members evaluated the

use of this word negatively, mocking it with repetition, and so Carrie was marginalised and eventually moved away from the group, albeit on a temporary basis.

Another example of such marginalisation is found in Thomas' (2005) study of the learning done by children in an online CoP based around the Lord of the Rings franchise. One popular sub-forum was a poetry discussion board in which users could submit their poetry and receive feedback from other members. The moderator for this board, Leggy (who was one of the four founding members of the community), required users to submit their poems to him before posting them publicly so that he could check the content was G-rated (that is, suitable for a general audience). Thomas learned that Leggy had 'found himself at the centre of a dispute and some heated discussion related to this strict regulation' (2005: 35) because the other administrators felt that it suggested a lack of trust. As a result, Leggy admitted to feeling as though he was no longer liked or wanted on the forums. However, other users confirmed they wanted him to stay and so he modified the rules and proceeded to moderate in a more egalitarian way.

As with the examples from Jones' and Bucholtz' studies, this shows that a member's position within the CoP is subject to them adhering to the group's mindset, publicly if not privately. Leggy's desire to police submissions for the good of the community was deemed, by the other administrators, to go against their desire to 'promote a culture of respect and tolerance' (Thomas, 2005: 35). Whilst the confrontation about his methods was seemingly well-meaning, then, for Leggy himself it came across as a challenge to his position within the community. However, Leggy was able to renegotiate a place for himself (by being reassured that he was right to ask that content be G-rated and consequently changing the rules to better suit the community's ethos) and could therefore maintain his full membership.

The renegotiation of Leggy's position within the forums was possible because CoPs are said to be mouldable to the needs of the community, adapting to suit their changing memberships and belief systems (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Investigating this can cast light on how community negotiations work and so membership types are a consideration for my analysis of AVEN.

Related to these points about marginality and peripherality, legitimacy is another key concept in the study of CoPs. This is concerned with the authority that community participants have to enact changes within the group and to move between types of membership (Wenger, 1998). To some degree this is determined by the authority of other group members who may prohibit, in some way, the individual's ability to move (perhaps via preventing them from having the training needed to achieve full membership).

The process of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) 'provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice' and it 'concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29). In this sense, for Lave and Wenger, LPP speaks to the process of learning and it is through this education in the practices of the community that new members may seek to attain full membership. Davies (2005: 567) characterises this concept further by claiming that it provides 'a safe environment in which to make mistakes, and gradually extend and normalise your practice'. LPP, then, enables peripheral participants to acclimatise to the group's practices without the undue pressure of needing to get things right first time.

One of the key arguments of Davies' (2005) paper is that CoPs are about 'legitimacy not choice'. By this, she means that even self-constituted CoPs are subjected to issues of access, gate-keeping and internal hierarchies and, as a result, potential new members must be sanctioned by higher ranking members of the community hierarchy to gain access to the community. This point, which Davies makes in relation to high school students wishing to join, but not being accepted by, the 'trendy' group in Kinney's (1993) research and the similar jock group in Eckert's (2000) research, indicates that wishing to join a CoP does not necessarily guarantee access to it.

This raises interesting questions about online CoPs where it is often possible for individuals to consume the content of a community without needing to actively contribute. These users are said to 'lurk' (see Nonnecke and Preece, 2000) and may therefore be able to learn the practices of the community without actually taking part in them (something identified by Bourhis *et al*. (2005) in their study of leadership in virtual CoPs). Whilst this is not typical of face-to-face CoPs, it is a common feature of online CoPs and it therefore challenges Davies'

(2005: 567) assertion that ‘gaining legitimacy is prior to gaining access to practice’ as gaining access to practices in online communities may well come first. Gaining legitimacy may then follow or not be granted at all. It is important to note, however, that non-participation in the community’s practices necessarily restricts the individual’s membership and may be said to disqualify them from membership at all.

It is important to distinguish here between the concepts of *practice* and *activity*. Practices are ‘ways of doing things, *as grounded in and shared by a community*’ (Eckert and Wenger, 2005: 583, original emphasis) and members may be peripheral if they engage in these to some minimal extent because they then have the ability to influence those practices going forwards. By contrast, marginal members may be ‘involved in the same *activity* as CoP members, but not in an engaged way’ (Moore, 2009: 126, original emphasis). In essence, this means that the ability that members have to influence practices is related to the quality of their engagement and not just their presence within the CoP. On these grounds, Moore (2009), Eckert and Wenger (2005) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) challenge Davies’ critique of the CoP approach as a mis-reading. As Moore (2009) suggests, taking note of these different factors means that we can see different levels on which individuals can contribute to and enact changes within the CoP.

It is also relevant to consider, here, the fact that CoP members may have different intentions with regards to their engagement with the community. Whilst some may be keen to actively participate and engage in changing practices, others may be more reluctant to participate and may instead be more interested in simply learning from others. Gee (2005b) argues that social spaces which facilitate this may be better thought of as *affinity spaces* than CoPs on the grounds that CoPs require discussion of ‘membership’ and ‘belonging’ which can in turn be difficult to reconcile with the kinds of relationships which some individuals have with these spaces. Whilst I believe that ‘membership’ and ‘belonging’ are important concepts for understanding engagement with the AVEN community, and that the CoP is therefore a helpful approach to take to understand this particular community, I recognise that there is overlap between the features of affinity spaces and CoPs (such as common endeavours, a shared space, the sharing of knowledge and different forms of engagement). Gee’s assertion that individuals may have different motivations for associating with a space such as AVEN is therefore important as it is possible that some AVEN users may view the forums as

something closer to an affinity space. This will be considered further in the discussion which follows.

The ways in which new members are received by the CoP are also crucial to their legitimacy within it. In their response to Davies' paper, Eckert and Wenger (2005) point out that legitimacy is gained, not just through participating in community practices but through having such participation accepted by other members. In this respect, they state that 'legitimacy in any community of practice involves not just having access to knowledge necessary for 'getting it right', but being at the table at which 'what is right' is continually negotiated' (ibid: 583). In this sense, then, the lack of restrictions on the participation of new members in online communities such as AVEN means that any participating member can potentially sit at the negotiating table and have their views and ideas incorporated into the community's ethos.

Here again we see evidence of the fact that CoPs are not rigid structures – they can alter depending on the needs of the group and its changing dynamics with regards to new members. Returning to the issue of membership, it is clear that the ability for members to move outwards, from full to marginal membership, and inwards, from peripheral to full membership, is key to these changing group structures. Also important here is the concept of 'brokering', when a community participant has multi-membership in different communities and can transfer practices from one community into another, thereby changing the structure and ideologies of the recipient community (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, new and peripheral members are particularly important to the changing structure of a CoP as they bring with them their experiences from other communities. However, in order for these practices to be taken up by the new community and to change the community's own repertoire of practices, the new members must have some legitimacy or their input will be ignored. As an example, Wenger cites a case in which a supervisor from a technical unit transferred into a claims processing centre and noticed that the two communities carried out a procedure differently. He was able to show that his previous experience had provided him with valuable insights and to then convince the members of the new community to adopt the procedure used by his old one. Thus, his prior experience and more senior position within the team gained him legitimacy in his new CoP.

However, legitimacy cannot always be achieved in this way. In fact, it is often community hierarchies – which Davies (2005) states are ‘demanded’ by the concepts of marginality and LPP as the only way to manage access to participation – which determine who gains legitimacy. Davies cites examples from Eckert (2000) which indicate that students aspiring to participation in the jock CoP were keenly aware of the students who were at the pinnacle of the community’s hierarchy and that it was clear that these high-ranking members were the ones who would legitimate other members’ participation. Where they did not legitimate participation, potential members reported being marginalised.

Moore again takes issue with Davies’ interpretation here stating that it relies upon the notion of hierarchy as a ‘top-down allocation of power with a clearly delineated and controlling centre’ (Moore, 2009: 126). She argues instead that CoPs have more fluid memberships and that hierarchy is not necessarily one directional. This is something which Eckert and Wenger also allude to in their rebuttal of Davies’ claims where they suggest that hierarchies may be less formally defined and may instead refer to differing levels of status within a CoP. This, they assert, is already encompassed by CoP theory and, as such, using CoP theory to study diverse communities is a better solution to the issues which Davies raises then modifying CoP theory.

Features of online communities also have the potential to challenge the salience of hierarchies. This idea relates to Davies’ point that ‘Where membership offers access to a scarce resource, entry *must* be limited, and thus choice, by definition, cannot be entirely open’ (2005: 573, original emphasis). Online communities tend to have large or infinite resources and so there is little need to restrict their membership. On the contrary, for a forum such as AVEN, which aims to encourage and facilitate discussions about asexuality, it is in some ways imperative that it takes on as many members as possible.

One final point of note relates to Wenger’s (1998: 46) statement that the community’s practice ‘supports a communal memory that allows individuals to [participate] without needing to know everything’. Thus, members of a CoP are not required to have full knowledge of the community’s social history and functioning in order to be a member as the ability to access other people’s knowledge within the community is sufficient to keep these practices alive. Wenger’s case study of a CoP centred around medical claims processing

evidences this. Whilst members were expected to learn how to process claims – and this inevitably entailed learning a great deal about the process itself – it was not necessary for individuals to know every detail or eventuality that they could encounter. This is because the knowledge of the community as a whole would have been a sufficient resource for missing knowledge should any individual participants have needed it.

As a result of this research, my own study uses the concepts of LPP and communal memory in order to understand how members learn the practices of the AVEN CoP. This requires exploring the implications of the CoP's joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire upon the identities that individuals build within the forums. I also consider how membership types impact upon how individuals conduct themselves within discussions.

2.3.2 The role of communities in society

Having looked at issues of CoP membership, I now turn to a consideration of the place occupied by communities within society and the values they have for their participants. I begin by looking at CoP concepts of relationality before bringing in additional community literature which, I argue, can expand these conceptualisations.

In my review of identity literature in Section 2.2, I established that identities are not intrinsic to individuals or groups but instead represent a dynamic process through which individuals come to understand themselves and their position within the world. Part of this involves aligning with and distancing themselves from other people, groups and ideals and, in so doing, sameness and difference become key concepts in how people orientate to those around them. In this sense, identity becomes as much an issue of belonging as it is about who we are (Blackshaw, 2010), with equal importance assigned to those groups to which an individual does not belong as those to which they do.

In accordance with this, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 11) draw attention to the fact that 'the characterization of a community of practice is its relation to other communities of practice and to the wider discourses of society'. This relates to Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle; CoPs should not be viewed in isolation from the rest of society. Instead, researchers need to look beyond their studied communities and consider the ways

they interact with and are influenced by other communities and the ideologies and practices of the societies that surround them. Understanding these wider cultures necessarily provides context for the practices observed in the communities under investigation.

Canning's (2016) study of the language used in Reddit and AVEN posts about whether or not asexuality counts as queer points to the ways in which asexual and queer communities distinguish themselves from one another. She found that polarisation (the act of drawing boundaries between 'them' and 'us' categories) and comparative language (used to pit different groups against each other to argue about who was most oppressed) were widely used techniques to reinforce boundaries between groups and to argue for and against the inclusion of asexuality as a queer orientation. Canning believes that looking at group dynamics within these online communities, and considering their effects on discursive representations of LGBT and asexual groups, allows us to identify ways to navigate these controversial and, sometimes, difficult conversations by being aware of the beliefs and arguments that inform the stances taken by others. This, she argues, could enable the breaking down of boundaries and increase inclusion of asexual people within LGBT communities.

On the topic of relating to other communities, Lave and Wenger's (1991) original conceptualisation of CoPs places the community within an institutional setting and questions of access, for example, are therefore usually determined by these institutions. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007: 33) add that communities of practice 'cannot be understood without viewing their relation to the institution' and Eckert's (2000) study of jock and burnout CoPs in American high schools provides a good example. Eckert found that, for each group, member identities were constructed in alignment with other members of their own group and in opposition to the identities and practices of the other group. For the burnouts, in particular, their identities were also constructed in opposition to the wider communities of the school and society, with their rejection of school rules and activities indirectly indexing their working-class home lives, in which they would likely find jobs as opposed to going to college or university (the destinations which the school prepared students for). In rejecting the institutional expectations of the school, then, they also renounced the middle-class aspirations of society at large.

Whilst this idea that CoPs are located within larger institutions is relevant in some situations, Davies (2005) acknowledges that this need not be the case. Self-constituted CoPs are those which exist independently of institutions but, much as a CoP within an institution is interconnected with other aspects of the institution, self-constituted CoPs also connect in various ways to other communities and ideologies around them. Jones (2012: 51), for example, argues that patriarchy and heteronormativity acted as 'imposed institutional structures in their own right' and, as such, constrained the walking group's practices in much the same way as an institution might. In the case of AVEN, I argue that allonormative ideologies serve the same purpose.

The above literature shows how CoPs are situated within the wider social world and how they are constrained by and gain meaning from their relationship to external institutions and ideologies. Whilst these relationships can offer important insights into the social pressures which may shape CoP identities, the rest of this subsection draws upon wider community literature to supplement the CoP theory and to explore the motivations that people have to attain or maintain membership of a community in the face of the constraints exerted upon it.

Blokland (2017: 6), for instance, discusses the concept of community as 'an entity that is cohesive, hangs or sticks together, and has clear boundaries'. The boundaries of which she writes are socially determined and usually based upon networks and geographical locations and key to her conceptualisations are the ideas of loyalty, support and togetherness. Connected to this, and perhaps owing in part to the ties between community life and traditional ideals acknowledged by classical writers such as Tönnies (2001 [1887]), people often maintain a romantic vision of what it means to be part of a community, endowing it with a sense of 'nostalgia and closeness' (Blackshaw, 2010: 1) which they may seek to nurture for the comfort that it provides.

Anderson's (2016 [1983]) concept of *imagined communities* speaks to these themes and is therefore a key consideration for understanding why members may be drawn to a community. Developed to explore the rise of nationalism and the devotion of people to their corresponding nation states, Anderson's theory has proved instrumental to present-day conceptualisations of national identity. He describes nations as being 'imagined political communities' (ibid: 6); imagined on the grounds that members will never know all of their

fellow members but, in their imaginations, nevertheless see themselves as connected. These nations, he states, have 'finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations' (ibid: 7). Thus, whilst they may encompass large numbers of individuals, there are still defined characteristics which mark members of one nation off from another and these are fundamental to the sense of identity that nations inspire. This is not to say that members of a nation are homogenous – indeed, Anderson acknowledges that inequalities and exploitations may exist between them. Rather, in times of conflict between nations, these differences may be overlooked by a belief in a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (ibid), a form of strategic essentialism. This sense of community, Anderson believes, is the reason why individuals have, in significant numbers, been willing to die for their nation. Thus, perhaps the most striking aspect of imagined community involvement is the desire that members have to be united with one another and the steps they will take to promote a collective identity.

Along these lines, Anderson uses the example of Sumatra to demonstrate how national identity may transcend geographical boundaries. He notes that although the Sumatrans 'are physically close […] ethnically related, understand each other's speech, have a common religion and so forth' (2016 [1983]: 86) to the Malays, they see themselves as being more closely connected with an Ambonese population who live thousands of miles away. The Sumatrans see themselves and the Ambonese as being part of the same Indonesian nation, in no small part because of a shared educational system which allowed them to access the same national history. Examples such as this clearly indicate the power that a shared history has to instill a common identity across great divides and this idea can apply to sexual identities too; if members of a sexual minority feel that their experiences separate them from their geographical neighbours then a distant or widely distributed community, made up of people with similar experiences to their own, may well offer a greater sense of solidarity and companionship. They are unlikely to ever know all of these individuals, and may never meet another member, but their shared history and experiences may facilitate a strong sense of belonging and devotion to one another. This concept in particular resonates with the online community of AVEN in my own research and so will be a helpful means of understanding what holds the community together in spite of the differences amongst its members and the issues that arise from them.

However, Hughes (2008) challenges Anderson's suggestion that imagined communities necessarily inspire commitment. In looking at the narratives of older lesbian and gay people's experiences of health and aged care in Australia, Hughes found that his interviewees differed in their willingness to engage and identify with imagined LGBTQ+ communities. He reports that, for some, identification with such communities was a source of pride but others saw little value in being connected to them. Some rejected a connection outright on the grounds that their sexual identity was a private matter and not one which required connecting with others. Hughes also reports that some participants 'particularly gay men, believed that older people are alienated from the wider imagined gay community' (2008: 174), with organisations aimed at lesbian and gay people not always fully accessible to older people. These scenarios suggest that some older gay people feel left behind by wider gay culture; this is useful to consider when studying the relationship between asexuality and LGBTQ+ groups, as well as the relationship between different asexual sub-groups in the context of the wider asexual movement.

Also relevant is Jones' (2007) study of the connection between imagined protection and imagined communities in the case of men who have sex with men (MSM) in China. Jones found that AIDS was seen as 'a matter of who you are' (2007: 109) rather than what you do and that avoiding certain types of people was therefore perceived as a means of avoiding contracting AIDS. This resulted in a practice of distinguishing between different categories of MSM which resulted in the stigmatisation of certain groups and the privileging of others. This in turn enabled the less stigmatised groups to imagine themselves as a separate community and one which could fend off stigmatisation from society and manage its relationship to other communities. Given the variety of subcategories of asexuality, similar issues manifest within the AVEN community and so this too is an important consideration for my research.

Relatedly, it is worth noting that, despite the clear benefits of community membership, Blackshaw (2010) points out that communities can have a darker side too. That is, for all the closeness and solidarity that communities inspire amongst their members, those characteristics are constructed in opposition to non-community members. This can cause intercommunity relationships to be hostile and aggressive and may result in one community oppressing another (Blackshaw illustrates this with the example of peasants and lords of the

manor). As the above studies have shown, this can be true of intracommunity relationships as well and, thus, my research explores both the positive and negative aspects of affiliation with the AVEN community.

As much as communities may be constrained by the societies in which they exist, they also offer their members the possibility for resistance – that is, they focus the efforts of individuals into a collective which then makes possible acts of resistance against overarching organisations or ideologies (see, for example, Defilippis *et al.*, 2010; Murray, 2015). In this sense, the nature of communities (in terms of the connectedness of their members and their relationality with other communities) may facilitate the queering of harmful influences and norms. A consideration of this is important for my research as activism is one of AVEN's key aims.

2.3.3 Online community research

Whilst the above discussion of community literature highlights the connected nature of communities, this has generally applied to face-to-face or local communities. And yet, this need not always be the case when geographical boundaries are not the only lines around which communities are formed. Indeed, in the modern, technological world, online gatherings have become increasingly commonplace and now represent a rapidly developing facet of community studies. However, as online communities also challenge traditional understandings of what a community is, they raise interesting questions about how to theorise communities going forwards (Delanty, 2010).

Wenger's original CoP theorisation states that 'communities of practice are everywhere' and that 'across a worldwide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing common interests' (1998: 7). Given this potential for the application of CoP theory to online contexts, then, it is perhaps surprising that such a small amount of online CoP research exists. Many papers take the foundational principles of the theory and use them to guide others in creating their own CoPs, particularly within management and business disciplines (for example, Dube *et al.*, 2006; Bourhis *et al.*, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2010). These non-linguistic case-studies provide insights into the factors needing consideration when setting up online CoPs in order for them to be productive learning

environments. However, they do not analyse the functioning, value and limitations of existing online communities or their links to the offline world.

For example, much as early sociologists (such as Tonnies (2001 [1887])) feared the impact of the modern age upon traditional communities, the internet age has long caused concerns that computer-mediated communications (CMC) could make face-to-face communications redundant. Giuffre (2013) refers to the 'cyber-dystopians' who contend that the computer age has caused people to spend their time communicating online rather than in their local communities, the perceived result being that they neglect and lose interest in their face-to-face communities. In contrast to these ideas, Kimble *et al.* (2001) demonstrate that face-to-face contact continues to have value. In their study of a community of IT workers spread across the US and UK, who interacted with one another via email and video conferencing calls, Kimble *et al*. found that, whilst participants found the online nature of their communications was generally sufficient for getting their work done, they also recognised the value of occasional face to face meetings, feeling that they gave them a better sense of who they were working with and greater motivation to work co-operatively.

In terms of the benefits of online communications, Giuffre (2013) comments on the asynchronous nature of online communities enabling individuals from different time zones and countries, and with different daily schedules, to easily interact and King (2019) notes that the relative anonymity of online CoPs may be more accessible for those who are reluctant to participate in offline communities. Similarly, the ability for online communications to be delivered to multiple recipients broadens the potential for communication. Most importantly, these conveniences can facilitate interactions with face-to-face communities and, in that sense, rather than causing the decline of offline communications, online communications may actually constitute 'an adaptive response to it' (Giuffre, 2013: 202).

Exemplifying this idea of an online community having an impact in the 'real' world, Potts (2014) studied an online community of professional gamers and their fans in YouTube videos and the associated comments. She found that the videos, in which the gamers (often playing in pairs) discussed the on-screen action, frequently contained examples of gay and sexual innuendo as well as references to infidelity, homemaking and nudity. The distribution of

these themes and the frequency with which they occurred were not equal across the gamer pairings and were often largely absent from videos containing female gamers.

As Potts acknowledges, the gaming industry is 'infamously rife with heteronormative and homophobic discourses' (2014: 164), perpetuating a common practice of using homophobic discourses to police masculinities. It is therefore perhaps surprising that homoerotic innuendo is not only used in these videos but also widely accepted, and even enjoyed, by the fanbase in the comments. Potts concludes that the prevalent use of innuendo filtered down through the community, destigmatising homosexuality and in turn stigmatising homophobia, with some viewers going on to challenge the derogatory language use of others. In this sense, Potts shows that, although the professional gamers may not have been consciously promoting non-normative discourses, their 'camp-inflected performances' had the effect of 'stimulat[ing] progressive conversations about sexuality and gender' (ibid). Although Potts does not utilise CoP theory within her study, her findings indicate a shared repertoire and joint endeavours within the community, suggesting that the CoP framework is applicable to this online context. Potts also posits that the increasing integration of online and offline communities may mean that, in future, the influence of attitudes formed within online communities may become 'even more central in the (re)production of ideologies' offline (2014: 184). Ultimately, Potts argues that the anonymity of the YouTube platform enabled users to experiment with non-normative genders and sexualities, and to transgress stereotypes, in a relatively non-judgemental setting. As such, these communities may work as a force for good, influencing the attitudes and discourses of young audiences.

One issue with existing theorising about online communities is that many writers have chosen to focus on platforms such as Facebook for their examples. In looking at such platforms, researchers often question whether the transient nature of the communications which occur within them can actually be said to constitute communities or whether they are instead simply 'moments' of interaction (Delanty, 2010). In fact, Blackshaw (2010: 105) opens his chapter on virtual communities with the assertion 'The first thing to say about virtual communities is that they are best understood as social networks or *network communities* rather than as communities in the orthodox sociological meaning of the word' (original emphasis). He justifies this by citing the frequently anonymous nature of online communities and the ability

that users have to interact with those who may share a particular mindset or an interest in a particular topic but who otherwise inhabit very different cultural and social spheres.

Whilst these arguments are true of some online communities, I argue that they are untrue of many others. For example, Waldron (2009) considers the intersections between online and offline Old-Time music communities. The CoPs in her study are comprised of well-established online and offline aspects, with the practices and associations of one generally reflecting the other. Her study focuses on the online contingents but she acknowledges that the communities are often relatively small and, thus, members of the online communities will often encounter fellow members in offline contexts, such as festivals. In this sense, Waldron rejects common assumptions that users of online communities always participate 'under radically different identities' (ibid: 107; see also, King, 2019) because, where the online and offline aspects are so closely linked, the identities of individual members tend to stay consistent across both mediums.

Conversely, many of the contributors in Mackenzie's study of the UK-based online parenting forum Mumsnet (2016; 2017) post anonymously but come from similar social backgrounds (being predominantly middle-class females who are mothers of young children) such that, were they to live closer to one another, it would not be unfeasible for them to form a face-to-face community. For users of such forums, who use the online platforms to seek and give advice and support, to air grievances and to celebrate progress, these communities seemingly satisfy the functions laid out for more traditional, face-to-face communities. To claim, as Blackshaw does, that features of online communications render these groups networks rather than full communities is to overlook the purposes for which these gatherings are used and to misunderstand the types of communications and interactions which can take place within them.

2.3.4 Summary

Having looked at relevant community literature, I argue that the CoP framework offers a suitable model for understanding the AVEN community and so this forms another key aspect of my theoretical framework, particularly for Chapters 6 and 7. Investigating AVEN as a CoP helps me to look at processes of learning and legitimacy within the forums and to determine

the ways in which these processes contribute to the functioning of the community and the interactions of its members. I have also considered the positive and negative elements of community identification which help me to understand how the AVEN community fits into the lives of its members, how the community is held together and how its members work together to achieve its stated objectives. The CoP also provides a model for exploring how AVEN positions itself in relation to other communities and the impact that this has upon its collective identity.

2.4 Chapter summary

Through the course of this chapter, I have explored the development of the language and sexuality field, in which my research is situated, as well as sociocultural approaches towards the study of identities and communities. These emphasise the need to consider the two concepts as inter-related and to look at social and cultural phenomena as influential to their construction. Along with taking sociocultural linguistics as an overarching mindset, I have identified a number of theoretical approaches which, together, constitute my theoretical framework. I adopt the view that identity is socially constructed rather than essential and that it is communicated via interaction and in relation to external normativities. Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005) provide a framework for understanding the role played by these interactional contexts and for shedding light upon the specific ways in which identity is constructed. I also use the CoP model to explore AVEN as a site of learning and negotiation, querying the ways in which its structure and hierarchy influence the identities of its members. These approaches are bolstered by taking a queer linguistic approach; this provides a lens through which to question the normativities which shape asexual identities and the AVEN community's relationship with other groups, as well as to challenge the processes of marginalisation and stigmatisation which these normativities invoke. The following chapter considers the methodological and analytical approaches taken towards my research.

3 Methodology and Analytical Framework

As indicated in Chapter 2, identities are dynamic processes of becoming which are heavily influenced by the contexts in which they are constructed. The CoP, as a site for learning and negotiating identity practices, is therefore an ideal model with which to understand identification within AVEN. As such, in this thesis, it is necessary to study the identity production of AVEN members as it occurs and in context, which enables the consideration of identity and community as interrelated phenomena. The following methodology and framework for data analysis have been developed with these ideas in mind, such that they illuminate the processes of identification which take place within the specific context of the AVEN CoP. To this end, I utilise a multi-method approach to data collection which includes an ethnography of the forums and an online survey of forum users.

This chapter provides further details about these methodological decisions and their implications for my research. I begin by exploring ethnography (Section 3.1.1) and surveys (Section 3.1.2) as research methods, along with the timeline for my data collection. I then discuss the methods chosen for data analysis in Section 3.2.

As my research is concerned with human subjects and a potentially sensitive subject area, I also consider the ethical practices employed throughout my research. Producing ethically sound research is important as it ensures that the researcher behaves responsibly and with a duty of care towards participants. It also helps to create a good working relationship with research sites and participants by ensuring that they can refuse to take part, that they are treated fairly, that they do not come to harm and that they benefit from the research (Copland and Creese, 2015). This, in turn, increases the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Rallis and Rossman, 2009).

In the context of my own research participants, I use the term 'respondent(s)' to distinguish the individuals who completed my survey, although both these and those whose forum posts I cite are 'user(s)' or 'member(s)' of the AVEN forums. 'Participant(s)' is used to refer collectively to the survey respondents and forum users featured in this thesis. When referring to individual participants, I routinely use the gender neutral pronouns

‘they/them/their/themselves’. This helps me to anonymise individuals whose contributions I cite and avoids unintentional mis-gendering.

3.1 Research design

Although I initially intended to spend around a year collecting data for this research, personal circumstances prevented this from happening. Having begun the ethnographic work in December 2016 and then distributed the survey in April 2017, I then had to pause the data collection until autumn 2019 when I renegotiated access to the forums with the AVEN project team and returned to my ethnographic data collection.

My data collection consisted of two steps. The first involved undertaking ethnographic observations with the AVEN community between 2016 and 2021, and the second overlapping step involved distributing a survey to AVEN members in 2017. The ethnography was distinguished by two phases, with the first looking at how the community functions and learning about pertinent topics and attitudes. These general but systematic observations (Androutsopoulos, 2014) then informed the design of the survey and focused the second phase of the ethnography.

For example, the survey was designed to find out more about how individuals felt about common discussion points, as well as to gain an understanding of the community’s demographics and respondent experiences of engaging with the community and their own identities. Meanwhile, the second phase of the ethnography – which I carried out exclusively as an observer – allowed me to collect examples of threads where forum members discussed their views on salient topics and negotiated their identities in relation to them.

The public nature of many of the forum threads meant that I was not required by law to seek permission to use the content as data (Kozinets, 2010) but, where I sought to quote individuals directly, I felt it was good practice to contact the users and request their consent. I therefore used AVEN’s private messaging function to send potential participants an information sheet (Appendix 2) and a consent form (Appendix 3) when I sought permission to cite their posts. These documents were also built into my survey so that I could seek approval to use the responses in my research. By asking participants to indicate consent at

these stages, I was able to ensure that they were aware of how their data would be used and that they were informed sufficiently to give or refuse consent.

Where individuals refused consent – either via overt refusal, lack of response or because they did not consent to each of the statements on the consent form – I respected the individual's wishes and did not use their data in my research. Not only was this a condition of AVEN's project team granting me access to the forums, it was also important to me as a sign of respect to the forum members and an acknowledgement of the fact that their engagement with AVEN may have a private purpose, even if it is publicly presented.

As my personal circumstances led to a delay in beginning the second phase of my ethnography, I had the option of analysing the data diachronically, comparing the forum practices from each time period and observing any changes. However, in the course of the second phase of my ethnographic work, I determined that the culture of the forums had not changed significantly in the interim. Conducting a diachronic analysis would therefore have provided few insights for addressing my research aims and so I treated the two time periods as one and consequently looked at identity and community practices within this period. To this end, my data consists of survey responses, collected in 2017, and forum posts from the second phase of my ethnography from 2019-2021. I now look at the use of these methods in more detail.

3.1.1 Ethnography in an online context

I began my data collection with the ethnographic work. Ethnography – whether offline or online – is a cross-disciplinary research method which Duranti (1997: 85) defines as 'the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretative practices characteristic of a particular group of people' and which is 'typically produced by prolonged and direct participation in the social life of a community' (ibid). Ethnographies therefore allow researchers to explore the manners and customs of individual communities from the inside in order to determine how they are structured and how they function (Duranti, 1997; Levon, 2013). As Eckert (2000) suggests, they allow researchers to search for locally constructed identity categories (and, by extension, any locally used practices) and to explore their salience within the community.

These points indicate that ethnographies can be used as a method through which to identify features of interest, before using other methods, or continued ethnographic work, to enquire about user perceptions of the usage and importance of these features within the community. Jaffe (2014), for instance, makes reference to the ways in which interviews with her informants – students and teachers in Corsican classrooms – provided additional metalinguistic data to contextualise and further her understanding of the ethnographic observations. The survey and continued ethnography serve this function in my own research.

Heigham and Sakui (2009: 92) describe the ethnographer's main purpose as to 'learn enough about a group to create a cultural portrait of how people belonging to that culture live, work, and/ or play together'. They also state that ethnographers 'explore how people create, sustain, change, and pass on their shared values, beliefs, and behaviour – in essence, their culture' (2009: 93). Thus, ethnography offers a means of exploring how cultural practices, and associated identities, are created, learnt and shared within the specific social contexts in which they exist, as well as how they change. This is therefore an ideal methodological approach for studying the lived experiences of members of a CoP as it delves into the practices of the community and considers the ways in which they serve the community's ethos and the needs of its members.

Where ethnography is cross-disciplinary, linguistic ethnography combines the observational qualities of ethnography with more structural research methods from linguistics (Rampton *et al.*, 2015). More common in Europe but influenced by the linguistic anthropological traditions of North America, linguistic ethnography is founded upon a close connection between language and culture, investigating 'the linguistic sign as a social phenomenon open to interpretation and translation but also predicated on convention, presupposition and previous patterns of social use' (Copland & Creese, 2015: 27). It is clear, then, that a linguistic ethnographic approach to data collection is compatible with the social constructionist approach taken here as it similarly assumes that language use is influenced by the social contexts in which it is produced. Without that context, language has little meaning.

This dependence upon context and interpretation means that ethnographic analyses may draw upon multiple sources for insights into community practices and events. Being immersed

within the community means that ethnographers create first-hand interpretations (the etic perspective) and can combine these with the interpretations of community members (the emic perspective) to create a more nuanced understanding of situations (Maybin and Tusting, 2011). In this sense, the researcher does not rely solely upon reports of behaviour (Heigham and Sakui, 2009) and can therefore prevent the research from being unduly influenced by the biases of participants and what they imagine the researcher wants or expects to hear. This is particularly important in the context of a study of a CoP because informal learning is key to the CoP's functioning but, as Eraut (2010: 249) states, 'informal learning is largely invisible, because much of it is either taken for granted or not recognized as learning; thus, respondents lack awareness of their own learning' (see also, Ziegler *et al*., 2014). As such, relying only upon participant interpretations of events could result in details about learning being overlooked. Yet ethnography also requires the researcher to pay close attention to the varied ways in which community members may understand their own contexts and experiences and to therefore avoid reductionist and essentialist thinking (Levon, 2013). Thus, combining emic and etic perspectives via ethnography allows us to shed more light upon how communities function than can either perspective used in isolation.

In this vein, ethnography has been used beneficially to study CoPs in sociolinguistics, with schools being common settings in which research is carried out. Key examples include Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study of racial identity amongst Latina youth gangs, Moore's (2003) research on femininities amongst teenage girls, and Eckert's (2000) and Snell's (2018) studies of class in the practices of teenagers and primary school children respectively. Meanwhile Jones' (2012) research with a walking group and Holmes and Woodhams (2013) research on a New Zealand building site offer examples of CoP ethnographies from outside of school contexts. These researchers all spent time observing practices from afar and also used interviews or informal social scenarios to elicit further details about the context of their use. My own research therefore builds upon such examples, using the survey step of my methodology in place of interviews to elicit deeper insights into the forum's practices and the ways in which individuals utilise and respond to AVEN and asexuality more widely.

An ethnographic study of the AVEN forums, supplemented with the reflective accounts of behaviour generated by my survey, therefore provides a good opportunity for studying asexual linguistic identity practices as they occur in spontaneous, non-research focused

contexts. Yet the online setting raises additional points for consideration. Kozinets notes that, while research into online 'gatherings' has shown that they share many of the same structural characteristics as face-to-face equivalents, the anonymous and easily accessible nature of online communities also facilitates the creation of 'distinctive style[s] of interaction' (2010: 25). He argues that this requires a tailored ethnographic approach, termed 'netnography', which takes into account four features distinct from traditional ethnographic contexts: alteration (the different nature of interactions in online compared to offline settings), anonymity (it being more difficult to know who participants are), accessibility (being significantly wider than offline contexts) and archiving (the automatic saving of conversations and data). However, Androutsopoulos (2008: 1-2) identifies two waves of computer mediated communication (CMC) research, the first of which focused on the 'features and strategies that are (assumed to be) specific to new media' and the second of which is 'informed by pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse studies and emphasises situated language use and linguistic diversity'. Kozinets' netnography emphasises the first of these foci whereas my own research focuses upon the latter.

Kozinets (2015) also argues that netnography involves undertaking engaged participant observation with the community (which Costello, *et al.*, 2017, laud as enabling the researcher to 'contribute to important online social narratives'). Thus, my own ethnographic work, which has not featured a great deal of my own participation (Section 3.1.1.2 provides more details), does not align with Kozinets' methodology. Although netnography therefore offers tools for understanding the online context, then, I argue that its structural focus and requirement for participation goes beyond the needs of my study and its concern with situated identity construction and the workings of an established CoP. Furthermore, Kozinets (2010: 66) asserts that 'the distinction between online and off-line worlds is becoming increasingly useless' because 'these categories have become hopelessly intermeshed in our contemporary society' which suggests that these categories are not as distinct as the netnographic methodology implies (see also, King, 2021). For these reasons, the current research takes inspiration from the principles of netnography but the specificities of this approach are not fully integrated into my methodology. Rather, I discuss my research in terms of 'online ethnography' (Gatson, 2011), in order to emphasise my understanding that online contexts present challenges to traditional ethnography but are not wholly distinct from offline

contexts. I also discuss the suitability of traditional ethnographic approaches to the context of AVEN.

3.1.1.1 Gaining access to the community

As an online platform, the AVEN forums benefit from being easily accessible to those with an internet connection and this is pertinent to AVEN's goal to raise and spread awareness of asexuality. This may explain the website's decision not to restrict access to the majority of the forum content and, as such, it is possible to view most sub-forums and posts without needing an account. Despite this, I realised I would need an account to view the restricted access sub-forums and to look more closely at the functioning of the forums. I therefore created an account in October 2015 and used it for the duration of my research, allowing me to experience the website as AVEN's members users do (with extra functions available to those who log in) and enabling users to easily contact me with any questions about my research.

Before I could begin my ethnographic work, it was necessary to seek official clearance from the University and the AVEN website administrators. I therefore submitted an application for ethical approval to the University of Nottingham, in July 2016, which was cleared without incident (Appendix 1). I then used this to submit a research request to the AVEN project team so they could verify that my methodology adhered to their rules for conducting research within the forums. This was cleared in October 2016 and I began the first phase of my ethnography in December 2016.

Whilst the aforementioned clearances sanctioned me to conduct the research and to use the AVEN community for contacting participants, it was also important to inform the general membership of the community about the work that I was doing. I therefore prepared an introductory statement in which I introduced myself as a researcher and outlined my research interests, aims and methodology. I closed this statement by inviting users to contact me if they had any questions and the message was posted into the 'Research Requests and Studies' sub-forum by the project team, in accordance with AVEN procedure. I believed that such transparency would be important for garnering the community's trust and for helping its members to feel comfortable with what I was doing (AVEN is, after all, not research to them

but part of their daily lives in which they should be able to feel safe and secure), as well as to promote the elements which users would be able to participate in (see Chege, 2015 for an examination of negotiating relationships with research participants).

3.1.1.2 Ethnographic data collection

I initially undertook unsystematic observations of the forums with my only goal being to see what the forums were like. Having already created an account, I was able to browse content and posts in all sub-forums (including those hidden from view to non-members). During this time, I avoided direct contact with the forum members but made frequent notes in a fieldwork diary and took screenshots to record my observations. These are referenced anecdotally as evidence of the community's practices. At this stage I was particularly interested in gaining some understanding of how the forums worked (in terms of access, rules and terms of use, administration and moderation of content, features of user profiles) and how they were laid out (appearance, sub-sections, hidden and visible content and features available to users when using the forums). This unsystematic observational stage lasted a few weeks, after which I began a period of more focused observation where I homed in on topics and themes which had begun to reveal themselves as salient to the community.

Unlike traditional ethnography, going into the field with online communities does not involve going to a physical location but instead requires the ethnographer to log in to an online platform (as in the online linguistic ethnographies of Mackenzie, 2016, and Thomas, 2004). In this context, ethnographers are not immediately visible to their participant communities which makes it easier to blend into the background of the community than in the case of traditional, face-to-face ethnographies (Davies, 2008). Therefore, even when the ethnographer introduces themself to the community members and lets them know their reasons for spending time with the community, the potential for online ethnographers to remain relatively invisible on a day-to-day basis means participants are more likely to forget that they are there. This means it is easier to take fieldnotes and recordings of events (such as screenshots) without instantly alerting members to the fact that such recordings are taking place. This in turn reduces the impact of the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972) – the issue that, whilst trying to obtain data that is characteristic of un-observed language use,

researchers must necessarily undertake observation and, in so doing, risk influencing the language that is produced.

In response to this benefit of remaining relatively invisible, I opted to undertake my ethnographic work predominantly as an observer with some minor elements of participant-observation. Interacting with communities as participant-observers is often viewed as a worthwhile endeavour in face-to-face ethnographic work (for example, Roscoe, 1992; Jones, 2012) as it enables the researcher to gain access to discussions by becoming involved enough to 'blend in' with normal community practices. In the case of online ethnographies, this benefit is less pronounced and, thus, it is easier for the researcher to observe without being involved in the interactions themselves.

Nevertheless, it can be difficult to maintain a role as a neutral observer in any ethnography, as Burkhart (1992) reported from his fieldwork with an Indian village community. He found that the locals were interested in his thoughts and experiences and showed signs of wanting to include him in their daily lives. In this sense, participating in discussions allows participants to gain a better understanding of who the researcher is and may help them to feel comfortable opening up about their experiences. This point resonated with me and contributed to my decision to post an introduction thread in the 'Welcome' sub-forum. This was more personal and less research-focused than my introduction post in the 'Research requests…' sub-forum and, in keeping with other Welcome threads, it included details about my sexual identity, how I had first come across asexuality and AVEN, and a little about my academic background and research interests. As an example of the benefits outlined by Burkhart, one user responded by asking about my academic background and showing an interest in my undergraduate dissertation, and other users posted welcome messages, in line with a typical AVEN practice of being open to newcomers. Just as these examples correspond to Burkhart's reflections about openness facilitating inclusion, they also show that similarities exist between offline and online worlds and in turn indicate the relevance of using a traditionally offline methodology to study an online context.

That I took the time to describe my background showed members my motivations for conducting my research and I hoped this would reduce barriers between them and myself by indicating that I sought to explore and support rather than ridicule and misrepresent their

experiences. This was a decision informed by my reading of other ethnographic studies in which the researchers dealt with their sexual identities as part of their research. For example, although Goodman (1992) experienced a positive outcome by concealing her lesbian identity in a conservative rural community, Williams (1992) reported that his Native American participants became more trustful, opened up to him more and invited him deeper into their community when he revealed that his interest in their same-sex desires was connected to his own homosexuality. In this sense, Williams attributed being 'out' with his participants as a key means of breaking down barriers and creating two-way discussions that reduced the formality of his questioning. This is similar to Jones' (2012) experience in which being open about her sexuality helped her lesbian participants to feel at ease with her which in turn led them to accept her as an eventual insider.

My decision was also influenced by Milks and Cerankowski (2014) reporting that not disclosing their own asexual identities led to participants incorrectly assuming them to be outsiders and consequently taking issue with their interpretations of asexual behaviours. This is evidently an undesirable outcome and so I sought to mitigate suspicions by making participants aware that although I was not an AVEN member outside of my research, I was nevertheless someone with overlapping interests.

The relationship between myself as a researcher and my participants was therefore an important consideration. Chege (2015) writes of the importance of being aware of and sympathetic to the expectations of participants and of having a responsibility to ensure that participants can benefit from the research as well as the researcher. In her work on beach boys in Kenya, Chege found that financial gifts and assurances about anonymisation, authentic representation and not being a police spy helped to compensate informants for their time and allay their fears. Although I did not offer compensation to my own participants, I did design my survey to be as convenient as possible (as outlined below) and was fortunate to be working with a community which is particularly open to research as this surely played a role in members being willing to take part. I also made it clear that I intended to give back to the community by making my research available to them upon completion. In the meantime, I participated in a conference organised by the community so that members could get a sense of how my research was progressing.

From the outset of my ethnography, it became clear that my research would not only be about the AVEN community but could also prove beneficial to it – as well as to the wider asexual population – on account of its potential to improve awareness of asexuality. Thus, it was paramount that I represented the community and its individual members in a fair and informed manner. In his account of ethnographic research with surgical staff, Bezemer showed how partnering with institutional insiders not only helped him better understand the community he observed but also, in turn, helped him write accounts which could 'resonate with the community under study and potentially have impact' (2015: 222). That is, allowing insiders to inform his research enabled Bezemer to produce results which could then be of benefit to them. Although I did not practise such a close working relationship with AVEN members in my own research, I took inspiration from Bezemer and opted for an emic, data-driven approach as a starting point before applying my own etic perspective to analysing the data. In this sense, I adopted what Cameron *et al.* (1992) refer to as an advocacy stance – that is, research *on and for* participants.

To this end, the themes observed during the first phase of my ethnography shaped the following stages of my research, influencing my survey questions (to be discussed further in Section 3.1.2) and the focus of the second ethnographic phase. In the latter ethnographic phase, in particular, I looked for examples of both the positive and negative aspects of the forums which had been highlighted by forum members in order to present a more nuanced and representative picture of experiences within AVEN. I then contacted individuals to seek permission to use their content in my research, reassuring them that they were free to decline and that their wishes would be respected.

When citing forum posts, I assign each user an anonymised pseudonym (such as, 'User 5X' where the number references the chapter and X references the user within that chapter). I also number the posts consecutively throughout each chapter (in the form 'Post 5.1' for the first post in Chapter 5) to avoid confusion when referencing multiple posts by the same user in discussions of particular threads and to facilitate referencing posts from multiple chapters in my discussion in Chapter 8. Any original formatting, such as paragraphs, italicisation, emoticons and images are replicated. All data are verbatim representations of the original and thus any typographical errors are also included. However, for reasons of space, sections of data not pertinent to my analysis are excluded.

3.1.2 Online survey

Following the first stage of my ethnographic work and overlapping it by several months, the survey stage of my research was designed to elucidate more details about observations made during the initial phase of the ethnographic work. Through asking targeted questions about observed practices, I was able to find out what individual members thought and felt about particular topics and to identify patterns across the community as a whole. As previously mentioned, this was inspired by the work of researchers such as Jaffe (2014) who used interviews to elicit metalinguistic data which contextualised her ethnographic observations. This also relates to Schleef's (2014: 43) advice that successful questionnaires should be underpinned by previous research which helps to 'gain insight into relevant issues' that then increases the appropriateness and efficiency of the survey. Thus, my mixed-method approach provided supplementary information to each method.

The survey consisted of 11 pages. It opened with a welcome page in which I introduced the structure of the survey and made clear that respondents could leave answers blank, or otherwise leave the survey entirely, at their discretion. This was followed by an information sheet with details about the purpose of the survey (Appendix 2), my intention to anonymise the data, details of my project's ethical clearance and my contact details. The page ended with a consent form presented as a list of statements to which respondents could agree or disagree. These statements were compulsory fields and respondents could not move on to the next page without answering them all. Where agreement with each statement was indicated, the respondent was then able to move on to the questionnaire. Where a respondent chose 'no' for one or more of the statements, I interpreted this as a lack of consent and so set the survey software to terminate their involvement.

The survey itself included 36 questions (with a combination of multiple choice and open-answer formats; see Appendix 4) which I estimated would take around 30 minutes to complete, although the actual time this took was dependent upon how extensive the answers were. In this vein, Brown notes that open-response questions provide a way of finding out what people think about particular topics and can therefore serve as the 'basis for further, more structured research' (2009: 201), yet Schleef (2014) warns that they should be used sparingly to avoid over-burdening participants (who typically end up spending longer answering them than they would for closed-answer questions). For this reason, I limited the

number of open-response questions as much as possible, made all of them optional and reminded respondents that their answers could be as long or as short as they liked.

Relatedly, accompanying closed-response questions with an open-response ‘elaboration’ question also enabled respondents to give more information about their closed-response answers. These questions were usually phrased as ‘Would you like to elaborate?’, giving those who were happy with their closed-response answer the opportunity to move on without having to explain further. These techniques avoided over-burdening respondents and yet, the responses that I gained clearly indicated that many were keen to write lengthy answers.

Looking to the survey questions themselves, page three was concerned with finding out some personal details about the respondents, including their age, ethnicity and sexual, romantic and gender identities. Although Schleef (2014) suggests that personal and demographic questions should be placed towards the end of the survey to avoid putting participants off, this could have caused confusion as, in a study about sexuality, questions about sexual identities are to be expected. I therefore foregrounded this section, particularly as Schleef also suggests that ‘early questions should be factual and undemanding’ (2014: 50). The use of single-line, open-answer fields enabled respondents to determine their own identities rather than be restricted by pre-defined, multiple-choice options, affording them greater autonomy.

Page four was concerned with general questions about asexuality, such as how it is defined and its relation to queer categories. In contrast, page six asked more personal questions about how respondents relate to asexuality, including issues of coming out and the adoption of labels, and was therefore aimed specifically at asexual respondents. As a result, page five contained a single compulsory question asking respondents to state whether they identified somewhere on the asexual spectrum, and was designed to route respondents through the following pages of the survey so that non-asexual respondents did not waste time on questions that did not apply to them.

Following this, page seven was concerned with how individuals related to the AVEN community and page eight focused on the terminology and labels used within it. Page nine then featured an open-ended question which invited respondents to contribute any comments or thoughts which they wished to express but had not felt were relevant elsewhere in the

questionnaire. The questionnaire then ended with a ‘Finish’ page – a feature required by the survey software – on which respondents could submit their responses, and a final page thanking them for their participation.

My decision to use questionnaires, as opposed to interviews or focus groups, had two primary motivations: representation and convenience. Interviews and focus groups would have required synchronous contact with participants which would necessarily have restricted participation to those who were either local to me, for face-to-face meetings, or who lived in compatible time zones, for meetings using video-call software. As AVEN is an international community, this would have inevitably led to participants representing a small fraction of the AVEN population. Questionnaires, on the other hand, are easy to distribute internationally to multiple individuals and mean that participants are able to take part informally and at their own convenience, potentially increasing participation rates (Evans and Mathur, 2005) and the geographical spread of participants.

Given the disparate nature of the AVEN community, delivering the survey in an online format was a choice of convenience, enabling easy and cost effective distribution and return of the surveys and greater anonymity of participants (Yip and Page, 2013). This convenience results in online surveys being less demanding on the researcher’s time than offline surveys (Fricker, 2008) but Manfreda *et al.* (2008) found that online surveys typically receive lower response rates. However, Manfreda *et al.* also found that responses for online surveys were typically of an increased quality, likely because respondents are free to complete them at leisure. Believing that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, I opted to use JISC Online Surveys (https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/) to build and distribute the survey and to partially analyse responses. I chose this platform because it is free to use and is inbuilt with software which protects the respondents’ data and enables the collation of basic statistics.

In order to ensure that my survey was only completed by AVEN users, I distributed it to participants via a thread within the ‘Research Requests and Studies’ sub-forum on AVEN. My post included a short explanation about my research alongside a link to the survey and participants were able to use the comment section to notify me of some access issues on the first day it was live and to ask me questions (for example, one person asked whether my use of the word ‘relationship’ only referred to sexual relationships – note, it did not). The public

nature of the comments meant that, where questions were asked, my replies could be viewed by other users and therefore prevented repeat questions.

I also emailed the questionnaire to three users who, upon seeing the initial post about my research, expressed interest in being part of it. These were registered but infrequent users of the forums who might not see a subsequent call for participation. Despite their minimal use of the forums, the fact that they used them at all (as evidenced by them having seen my research request) qualified them as AVEN users and I believed that their experiences as marginal community members could prove insightful.

Similarly, although my research interests are primarily concerned with the identities and lived experiences of asexual individuals, it was also important to allow non-asexual members of the forums to take part. This was because my interests in community affiliation applied to the community as a whole and my ethnographic work had indicated that non-asexual members also played a role within the community.

The survey was set up so respondents could move backwards and forwards through the pages, meaning that they would be able to change answers as they saw fit. Completion of questions was only compulsory in the case of the consent form and the routing question on page five, and respondents were otherwise able to leave questions blank if they wished to. They were also able to save their answers and return to them later. This risked respondents forgetting to complete the survey but I deemed it a worthwhile inclusion as the survey was quite long and this feature enabled those with limited free time to complete the survey at their convenience.

The survey elicited 116 responses in the five-months it was open for submissions. Of these, two had to be rejected – the first because the respondent stated their age as under 18 (I had stated in my ethical application that I would only include participants over 18) and the second because the respondent had failed to give consent to all of the points on the consent form but had inadvertently circumvented the inbuilt termination process. This left me with 114 usable responses which formed the basis of the survey portion of my data. When citing survey respondents, I will group responses thematically and will number them continuously in each chapter (in the form (5.1) for the first example in Chapter 5). Whilst this will obscure

connections between a particular respondent's contributions, this is not detrimental to the aims of this thesis as I am more concerned with general identity practices than with any individual's specific identity.

It is worth noting that I utilise the term 'response(s)' to refer to the content generated by each respondent in answer to the survey questions. In this sense, where all of my survey respondents answered a question, 114 respondents would be said to have generated 114 responses. When analysing the linguistic features used in these responses, some respondents used features more than once, or used more than one feature, and so, when quantifying the use of such features, totals may equal more than 114.

Having outlined the methodological approaches taken in this research, I now explore the approaches used to analyse the data gathered in the course of this research.

3.2 Analytical approach

My methodology generated rich textual data and so I have adopted a predominantly qualitative analytical approach which centres upon discourse analysis. This has allowed me to assess the language use and interactional features of the forum posts and survey data and to consider these features in relation to the social contexts in which they were used. However, my qualitative analysis is also supplemented with some quantitative insights into the demographics of the AVEN community and patterns of identification and language use amongst community members.

As previously stated, one reason for choosing to use the JISC Online Survey software was that it is capable of calculating statistics for the closed question responses. However, many of the demographic questions featured open-answer options and so I needed to manually calculate the statistics for these categories. Doing so provided a degree of context and quantifiable support for my discourse analysis.

3.2.1 Discourse analysis

Before looking at the merits and applications of discourse analysis, it is important to begin by clarifying my use of the term 'discourse'. There is, as Gee discusses, a distinction between 'Discourses' – distinctive ways of using language which are attributed to specific social identities – and 'discourses' – that is, 'language in use or connected stretches of language that make sense' (Gee, 2008: 154). For my own analysis, I adopt Gee's concept of 'big d' discourse, although I refer to it using a lowercase 'd', and use alternative terms such as 'language', 'post', 'response' and 'thread' to refer the 'little d' sense. I also observe Foucault's (1972: 49) use of discourse to refer to 'practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak' – that is, language which constructs reality. This conceptualisation highlights the fluid construction and interpretation of meaning in interactive contexts, recognising the diversity of human experiences (Baker, 2008).

In order to analyse my data, and in line with my social constructionist theoretical framework, I use a discourse analytic approach which focuses upon language in use and assesses its wider social implications. In this respect, I follow the examples of Brown and Yule (1983: 1) who describe discourse analysis as 'an investigation of what that language is used for' and Gee (2005a: 1) who describes it as 'a theory and a method for studying how language gets recruited "on site" to enact specific social activities and social identities'. These statements highlight the fact that discourse analysis enables consideration of not only the linguistic features themselves but also of the purposes for which they are used. This necessarily concerns the social contexts which surround the language users who produce the discourse under study, making discourse analysis pertinent to sociocultural linguistic studies. I therefore argue that discourse analysis facilitates exploring the construction of identity in relation to the contexts in which it is produced as it places the language itself at the heart of the analysis. My ethnographic fieldwork serves to illuminate the contextual settings, providing insights into practices typical for the AVEN community, in turn helping me to decipher meaning in individual examples of language use (Androutsopoulos, 2008).

Also important here is the idea that discourses are influenced by ideologies. As van Dijk (1995: 138) wrote, ideologies are 'systems that are the basis of the socio-political cognitions of groups' and they 'organize social group attitudes consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues'. Hence, consideration of ideological influence

is crucial when analysing community discourse practices as ideologies inevitably impact upon the attitudes and identities that community members express. They help to foster a sense of togetherness but can also underpin divisions and conflict within and between groups. In the case of a community such as AVEN, where activism and awareness-raising are key elements of community involvement, the presence and adoption of ideologies can represent a call-to-action and the recruitment of individuals to a shared outlook that facilitates such endeavours. This has clear links to Anderson's (2016 [1983]) imagined communities in that sharing an ideological outlook may be seen to bind the AVEN community together in a manner which evokes loyalty and willingness to defend the community's integrity and ideals.

Relatedly, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) principles of identity – which are fundamental to my theoretical framework – also inform my approach to analysing my data. The principles of positionality and relationality are most important to my analysis, being underpinned by the idea that identity is co-constructed with other community members and with social structures more broadly. The analysis of my data therefore focuses upon the interactional function of language – that is, the language 'involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes' (Brown and Yule, 1983: 1). This provides insights into the ways in which AVEN members relate to the AVEN community and the allosexual world, as well as into how they construe and communicate their experiences of asexuality.

It is worth noting that my data are written and, yet, the forum posts serve a conversational purpose and so also contain some features more typically associated with the production of spoken texts, such as turn taking and representations of laughter (features commonly analysed using conversation analysis – see, for example, Wooffitt, 2005; Schiffrin, 1994; Stommel 2008). The nature of such CMCs therefore present some challenges for traditional discourse analysis. However, Herring's computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) offers a tailored approach which focuses upon 'the empirical description of computer-mediated language and varieties of computer-mediated discourse' (2001: 613). As my research is concerned with identity construction and community affiliation, the consideration of the structural features of the posts themselves is of less concern to my analysis. However, where they impact upon the construction of identity within AVEN, these will be considered in addition to the sociocultural analysis.

As an example of CMC research, Simpson (2005) found that the particularities of online communities can sometimes mean that conversational turn taking occurs out of sync and multiple conversations may overlap on the screen. As a result, Simpson found that their participants had to draw on background knowledge of the technological aspects of the community and the topics under discussion in order to interpret the input of their fellow community members as coherent and cohesive. Acknowledging and understanding the difficulties posed by the online format therefore helps analysts to understand how the forum format influences the conversations that take place between forum members and, thus, issues of coherence are also important considerations for my analysis of AVEN where the same disjoints occurred within forum discussions.

My approach to discourse analysis has also been informed by my use of the CoP and the attention that it pays to processes of learning within the community. Ziegler *et al*. (2014) used discourse analysis to investigate informal learning practices in a hiking forum. They believed that analysing the archived posts enabled them to understand the learning practices without having to rely on reflective accounts elicited from individual users. This, they felt, would have been more difficult as users would not always recognise the informal learning experience as an example of learning. Through analysing the forum posts, Ziegler *et al*. found evidence of community members noting their own experiences, questioning the assumptions of others and jointly reinterpreting experiences to create and share knowledge. Although they do not refer to their research group as a CoP, there are clear similarities between the learning of the hiking community and that of AVEN's members. Thus, Ziegler *et al*.'s research exemplifies the benefits of discourse analysis for studying a community for whom learning is at its heart and the present study follows their example.

I approached my discourse analysis from a bottom-up, data-driven perspective, drawing on my ethnographic observations to locate topics worthy of further investigation. As a result, the ways in which asexuality is defined (Chapter 5), identification with the AVEN community and its ideals (Chapter 6) and the relationship between asexuals and the allosexual world (Chapter 7) became key foci for my analysis.

3.3 Summary

With this chapter I have shown how my literature review and theoretical framework have inspired the design of my methodology and analytical framework. My adoption of a social constructionist stance has necessitated the adoption of a methodology which can explore the context-dependent nature of identity construction. For this reason I have utilised an online ethnographic approach which allows me to experience the AVEN community from the inside, to see how it functions and how members use it. To support this ethnographic work, I also distributed an online survey to AVEN members so that I could seek further insights into practices observed during the ethnography.

These methods have supplied me with posts from the forums and survey responses and I analyse these data using qualitative discourse analytic techniques to investigate the linguistic choices that community members make and the ways in which they engage with one another in the construction of their identities. Minimal use of statistical techniques will supplement my qualitative results.

In the chapter which follows, I provide an overview of the AVEN forum so that its structure and functioning – and what these can tell us about identity practices within the community – are clear.

4 Contextualising AVEN

Having looked at the methodology employed in this research, as well as at the techniques utilised to analyse my data, I now present an overview of my research site, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). I begin with a consideration of the structure of the forums, as this provides insights into how they are used, and follow this by looking at AVEN's membership and the features available to users for presenting their personal information to others. Finally, I outline the role of AVEN's moderating team and how this contributes to user engagement with the community. These topics are considered in relation to the CoP model (Section 2.3.1) to establish its relevance to the inner workings of the AVEN forums. Whilst this chapter does not analyse any data, it does at times draw upon data anecdotally to illustrate my ethnographic observations.

4.1 Forum structure

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) is an online community and information hub founded by David Jay, an American asexual activist, in 2001 with two main aims: 'creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality' and 'facilitating the growth of an asexual community' (AVEN, 2022). AVEN is split into two linked but distinct areas, namely the website and the forums. The website is predominantly informational, with pages dedicated to AVEN's history, asexuality FAQs, contact points, links to other asexual-focused websites (including blogs, social media pages and other asexual communities), and news on research and media coverage of asexuality. However, it offers little evidence of the ways in which community members construct and negotiate identities and so it is not included in my analysis.

The forums, by contrast, are primarily interactional, allowing members to discuss topics of interest to the community, as well as to develop friendships with other asexuals. In addition, the forums are used to seek information, with users able to ask questions tailored towards their own needs and concerns. In these ways, the AVEN forums conform to what Kozinets (2010: 36) describes as a *building community*; that is, a community which offers 'both a strong sense of community as well as detailed information and intelligence about a central, unifying interest and activity'. Focusing upon the forums, then, provides access to individuals

constructing asexual identities and also to a context in which it is possible to examine how the culture of the community impacts upon the identities of its members.

In the course of my ethnography, I began to understand how the concept of the CoP fit with the structure of AVEN. For example, AVEN operates as an institution of sorts, with a structural hierarchy of moderators and administrators who enact the aims and safekeeping measures which the website hosts deem relevant (in this sense, it may be said to contain a top-down hierarchy of the sort discussed by Davies, 2005). However, whilst the AVEN hosts fulfil many of the same functions as the institutions in other CoP studies (such as schools and workplaces), I instead refer to AVEN as an *organisation* as I believe this better represents its less formalised nature. Whilst the organisation necessarily gives context to the community that has formed on the forums, for example by setting rules which community members must adhere to and by providing an understanding of asexuality which members may respond to, I found that the community is guided by but distinct from the work of the AVEN hosts. This is because although the community's members are guided by AVEN's rules and are often community-minded, they are distinct individuals, acting in their own capacity with their own beliefs and values which sometimes differ from AVEN's official perspective.

I therefore delineate between 'the AVEN organisation', used to refer to the organisation behind the website and forums, and 'the AVEN community of practice (CoP)', used to refer to the community of users which has built up on the forums. In this respect, the AVEN CoP is formed in relation to the AVEN organisation and it is from the organisation that the CoP gains much of its meaning. Thus, I argue that the AVEN CoP is to the AVEN organisation as the jock and burnout CoPs are in relation to the institution of the school in Eckert's (2000) work. 'AVEN' is used to refer collectively to the organisation and the CoP because, at times, it is clear that AVEN's users see them as connected. This is reflected in discussions of topics such as the supportive atmosphere on AVEN, in which the organisation and the CoP may be seen as jointly responsible.

I also acknowledge that multiple CoP's exist within the AVEN forums – specifically, the 'Gender Discussion' and 'Older Asexuals' subforums have very distinct memberships and their own sets of practices and shared endeavours which guide interactions within them. However, in the interests of studying AVEN as a whole, I do not focus on these particular

CoPs in my analysis. Nevertheless, many of their members interact within the rest of the AVEN forums and so my focus upon the 'AVEN CoP' is inclusive of them.

It is also worth clarifying that I refer to AVEN as an 'online' community as opposed to a 'virtual' one. Although the difference is perhaps nominal, 'virtual' is often applied to roleplaying or 'second-life' contexts (see Chalmers (2017) and Schroeder (2008) on 'virtual worlds'). The AVEN community, however, is founded upon real world aims and discussions and so I feel that describing AVEN as an 'online' community better represents this and acknowledges its connection to the offline asexual contingent.

Whilst most of the forum content is open access – that is, visible without needing an account – entry to some sub-forums is restricted to those who sign in. These include the Meet Up Mart (where users arrange offline get-togethers) or areas where personal but not asexuality-related topics are discussed, such as the Open Mic (where users can post about creative projects) and Celebration sub-forums. Signing in is also necessary for those who wish to post content, to view user profiles and to take part in forum practices such as voting for new moderators. This ensures that those accessing these features are traceable, enabling the moderators to keep the forums safe and inclusive.

As shown in Figure 1, the AVEN forums feature a number of more closely defined 'sub-forums' which are grouped into loose categories (called 'sections') on the forum homepage. Each sub-forum can then be opened to access the individual 'threads', sometimes called 'topics' on the forums, in which users submit their contributions. Individual user submissions within these threads are known as 'posts' or 'comments'.

Figure 1 – AVEN forum interface.

Each user then has a 'post count', which is the total number of posts they have contributed to the forums. Post counts represent an important rite of passage and mark of community engagement in online settings (Beyer, 2014: 47) and so it is telling that the AVEN organisation excludes posts in its 'Just for Fun' sub-forum (which are completely removed from discussions of asexuality, as highlighted by the adverb 'just') from contributing to post counts. This indicates that the organisation places greater importance upon the discussion of asexuality than purely social topics, with users able to gain more status from the former. This is important because the latter could otherwise be used as an easy way for members to build up a large enough post count to grant them access to features reserved for members who are more invested in the forums (Kraut and Resnick, 2011). In AVEN, these features include voting for new staff members and so restricting access means that the AVEN organisation ensures that new and infrequent posters, and those only making more superficial contributions to the forums, are not immediately able to influence the forum's inner workings. Using post counts to restrict access is therefore an example of an AVEN community practice which, when the relevant criteria are met, leads to members being legitimised and granted access to increased involvement with the community.

Having argued, in Section 2.3.1, that AVEN qualifies as a CoP, I contend that there are parallels here with observations from other CoP studies. For example, Jones (2012) reported that a lesbian walking group only allowed longer established members to plan walks, while the jock group in Eckert's (2000) study featured higher status individuals who could legitimise (or otherwise delegitimise) the status of lower ranking community members.

Nevertheless, studies have shown that even CoPs formed around institutional restrictions and structured hierarchies can be sites of collaborative construction of identities when members are guided by and respectful of the community's normative practices. For example, Schnurr and Chan (2011) identified teasing and humour being used as a means of reducing the distance between those at different levels of the hierarchy in workplace CoPs (also, Schnurr, 2009) and Mullany (2006) observed women managers using small talk to promote collegiality and solidarity in business contexts. In this sense, the presence of a hierarchical moderation structure need not impede the collaborative construction of identities if the community has practices in place which enable the flattening of the hierarchy (this will be explored further in Section 6.3). These examples, and AVEN, therefore evidence the existence of hierarchies within CoPs.

4.2 Membership

Despite its connection to the offline asexual world, AVEN may not be representative of all asexuals[6]. For instance, although the online nature of the community is geographically convenient and relatively accessible, the need for an internet connection and some degree of computer competence may be a barrier to access for those without. As a result, forum (and, subsequently, my research) participants were more likely to be younger people from developed nations. Indeed, my survey results support this idea. They show that respondents fell within a range of 18-60 years old but that the most common (modal) age category was 18 and the median age was 25. This shows that the smaller 18-25 range was more densely populated than the larger 25-60 range.

It is worth noting that, for ethical reasons, I restricted participation to those 18 years or older which resulted in a portion of the community (those under 18) being unrepresented by my research. My ethnographic observations indicated that users under 18 *do* participate in the forums, though users under 13 must prove parental consent before their accounts will be verified by the AVEN administrators. Such a measure is taken to safeguard young, and potentially vulnerable individuals, but could also be seen as another barrier to inclusion for

[6] Here, I draw upon my survey data, a sample of the AVEN population, to illustrate the AVEN community's demographics.

children who are not comfortable revealing their interest in a forum about sexuality to their parents or guardians.

Another area in which under representation is evident is in the geographical spread of my participants. Looking at their location data shows that 55% (63 individuals) were North American and 39% (44 individuals) were European, indicating the vast majority come from developed nations. When we also consider that just 17% (18 individuals) identified with a non-white ethnic category, it is clear that my survey respondents, and potentially AVEN users more generally, fall within a particular set of demographic categories and cannot be considered representative of the world's population at large. However, given that online media are typically how information about asexuality has been disseminated thus far, it could be argued that the represented groups are precisely the ones who are most likely to identify with the asexual label, on account of their increased access to information (the correlation between exposure to asexual information and adoption of the label is explored in Chapters 5 and 6).

It is also important to note that AVEN is not exclusively used by asexual individuals, with 3.5% (4 individuals) of my survey respondents identifying outside of the asexual spectrum. Anecdotal evidence from my data indicates that these members use the website to gain information because they find some asexual topics useful for understanding their own life experiences or because they seek to support and understand an asexual acquaintance. Although my research is concerned with the construction of asexual identities, the contributions of non-asexual forum members, and how they are received by the community, are relevant for understanding the development of the community's identity as a whole and so I elected to include them in my data.

My survey results also indicated that the majority of my respondents were relatively new to the forums. None had been consistently present for more than five years (although, during my ethnographic work, I did come across users who had been present for longer) and around half of those who answered the question 'How long have you used the AVEN forums?' (Question 25) indicated that they had been members for less than one year. This could indicate that longer-term members experience research fatigue due to the amount of research previously carried out on the forums and could therefore be under-represented in my survey data. It

could also indicate that new users represent a significant proportion of the AVEN population and so their membership is likely to be influential.

As discussed in Section 2.3.1.1, CoPs are said to be able to adapt to the changing needs and memberships of their populations (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), with new members influencing the mindset and practices of the CoP as a whole (Wenger, 1998). However, AVEN provides evidence of this occurring at the expense of longer-term members. Although it is difficult to trace the extent to which new members have altered the community understanding of what it means to be asexual, it is important to note that a number of long term members opted to leave the community in 2017 on account of no longer feeling represented by AVEN stances. In responding to my survey, one such individual reported that 'I have been feeling more and more unwelcome, increasingly due to decisions and policies by AVEN's admods' and also stated that 'I can no longer in good conscience associate with the decisions and policies made by [AVEN's] staff of admods and the [Board of Directors]'. These comments speak to the idea of a shift within AVEN's stances (specifically in relation to how asexuality is defined and who can claim the label) and the user's realisation that their own beliefs were then at odds with the community's and that their membership of AVEN was subsequently untenable. Here we can see an example of how AVEN reflects the traditional CoP model in that community consensus guides engagement and enforces expectations of its members, pushing out those who do not align with the community's ethos.

4.2.1 User presentation

Each AVEN member has a profile page in which they can input personal details for others to see and some details are also included alongside their username when they post content on the forums (see Figure 2). Suggested fields lead users towards providing certain information (for example, gender and sexuality but not religion or employment) and yet users also have options for customising their details. For example, the majority of fields are open-answer and non-compulsory so users are not forced to provide information or to decide between pre-determined categories for fields such as 'gender', giving them autonomy in how they present themselves. The 'location' category is also notable in this regard as, although many members do choose to give their city, state or country, it is also common for users to opt for more whimsical answers such as 'over the rainbow'. Such choices can conceal a user's real

location, providing greater privacy, or can otherwise be used humorously or to create a theme across their profile. Usernames can play a part in this too. These are words or short phrases which act in place of the user's name on the forums and are therefore inevitably personal choices which often give insights into the individual's interests, affiliations and personality. Users can also select a small image as an avatar, or profile picture, to represent themselves.

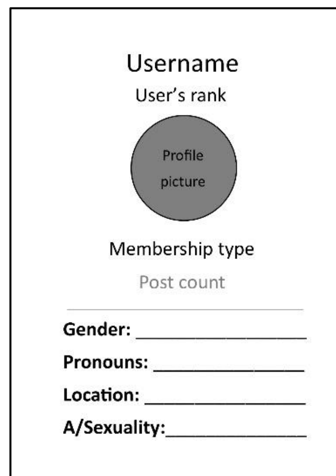

Figure 2 – Simulated user profile information as it appears next to forum posts

The issue of authenticity is relevant here. As discussed in Section 2.3.2, the validity of online communities is often challenged by the belief that users do not operate under their own identities. Waldron (2009) showed that this would be difficult to achieve in her online community of Old-Time music fans due to the interconnected nature of the online and offline contingents and I believe there is evidence of this in the AVEN community too. This is partly because many asexuals arrive on AVEN with the desire to meet and form friendships with other like-minded individuals. This is the impetus for the organisation of meet-ups and so, although AVEN's international membership means that many users will not encounter each other outside of the forum on a day to day basis, some AVEN members will indeed meet each other in 'real' life. Therefore, whilst I do not suggest that all AVEN members wish to disclose their true identities to other users – indeed, many choose to use pseudonyms and withhold details which may identify them – I posit that the general tendency of AVEN members is to project an authentic identity, if only in a partial sense, as opposed to the radically different identities that are more likely in roleplaying communities.

Also linked to this concept of authenticity is the idea that the anonymous nature of forum posts – in contrast to face-to-face settings – allows users to explore their own identities by sharing their experiences and trying out different labels among like-minded individuals. This enables them to performatively construct and become comfortable with their identities in a safe space before revealing them to potentially hostile audiences, such as friends and family, offline. This ability to experiment with identities in a safe space mirrors the circumstances in Potts' (2015) study of a YouTube gaming community and bolsters the idea of online communities as safe spaces where members can learn acceptable ways of participating, drawing upon communal memories (Wenger, 1998) and being guided by more experienced members, without the undue pressure to get things right first time (Lave and Wenger, 1991; also, Davies, 2005).

In the world of online communities, such legitimate peripheral participation can take the form of lurking (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). In writing about their reasons for using the forums, one survey respondent reported that they lurked and read the forum content without contributing anything of their own. They felt 'it is helpful to have that option – to review others' comments without necessarily having to engage, especially when exploring whether the identity label or community seems like it would be more useful than not'. That individuals can use the anonymity afforded by the online setting at a time when they may be unsure about who they are, and consequently feel vulnerable, is seen as a positive factor and one which allows individuals to benefit from the information available and then perhaps reveal themselves (either to the online community or in their own real-world contexts) once they feel more sure of and comfortable with who they are.

This potential for online communities to facilitate learning without the need for direct participation raises questions about how members who adopt such behaviours fit into the CoP model. Whilst such individuals may approach the community in keeping with its joint enterprise and may subsequently become familiar with the community's shared repertoire, their non-participation in the shared practices means that they cannot fulfil the mutual engagement aspect of the CoP model. The combination of these three aspects is fundamental to Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of the model and so it follows that an individual who does not participate in all three cannot occupy full membership. In this sense, lurking users may be said to occupy self-imposed marginality.

Their ability to legitimately observe the community from afar without participating in its practices is a feature of online CoPs which is neither reflected in face-to-face CoPs nor fully accommodated by the existing CoP model. However, they do perhaps align more with users of Gee's (2005b) concept of affinity spaces in that they may be more concerned with learning than with connection and belonging. This could therefore point to AVEN being a CoP to some and an affinity space to others. Ultimately, although lurkers do not contribute data to the forums, and so cannot be a major focus of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge their presence as they present a challenge to existing theory which will be considered further in Chapter 8.

4.3 Moderation and administration

The AVEN forums are overseen by a team of administrators and moderators who adopt a position of authority, alongside their roles as everyday forum users, and switch between these roles as required. Typically, the moderators supervise the forum users and monitor the content that they post whilst the administrators share some of these responsibilities and also undertake disciplinary actions such as banning users, as well as maintaining the forum platform. These two groups of users are collectively known as the 'admods', a term widely used in forum contexts which is formed from a blend of the two associated roles and which therefore indicates that these roles operate at a similar position within the hierarchy of forums. AVEN's admods are marked by the words 'Administrators' or 'Moderators' in red or green text (respectively) below their profile picture on the forums.

In their official capacity, the admods oversee the forums to ensure that members adhere to the rules set out in the Terms of Service (ToS)[7] – users must agree to these when first creating their account and they are subsequently available in the 'Site Info Centre' for easy reference. The admods write in bold green or red typeface to draw attention to official postings (such as serious 'play nice warnings', announcements and thread moves or closures). They otherwise use the standard black typeface when contributing as normal users – that is, in an unofficial capacity. These community practices are stated in the ToS and thus it is clear to community

[7] These are part of the CoP's shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), laying out the forum rules, and serve to authorise or illegitimise conduct on the forums.

members which users have the authority to make official decisions and also precisely when they are acting in this capacity. In presenting forum data produced by admods, I denote their role and the capacity in which they post in the form ‘moderator/ administrator – unofficial/ official’.

As part of their roles, the admods may warn users if their conduct risks them falling short of AVEN’s standards so that they can change their behaviour before more official action needs to be taken. Whilst these warnings represent a first step towards official action being considered, they are given in the form of unofficial posts in the standard black typeface, indicating that the warnings do not yet carry any negative consequences. However, if such warnings are ignored, the admods may progress the situation further and carry out more severe, official actions (denoted via the official red and green typefaces), including removing potentially offensive material from posts or banning users (temporarily or permanently) from the forums. The admod team stress that such measures are only taken when deemed absolutely necessary (for example, only when users consistently ignore warnings) but some users feel that the admods exercise their powers too freely and warn users against activities and behaviours which they believe should be permitted. This is explored further in Chapter 6.

When new members are needed for the moderation teams, candidates can nominate themselves, providing they have 100+ posts, have been a member for 6+ months and do not have any forum violation warnings against their name. Registered users with 25 or more posts can then participate in the vote. By allowing users to select their moderators in this way, AVEN affords its members a sense of ownership and ensures that they are given a say over who has control of their forums and posts. Each admod is then responsible for particular activities or sections of the forums and they discuss situations which arise within a private subforum. A declassification team (members of which are also voted into position) then works through the content of this subforum, redacting confidential details so that the content can be archived in an area which all AVEN users can access. This means that the moderation and administrative processes are transparent to AVEN members.

4.4 Hierarchical structure

As indicated in Section 4.3, AVEN's admods operate towards the top of the CoP's hierarchy, enforcing the rules laid out by the AVEN organisation. The voting in of the moderators means that their powers are invested in them by those who will be subject to those powers and this is a sign that their fellow users entrust them with the responsibility to carry out their roles fairly and with integrity.

Whilst members of the project and declassification teams (PT and DT respectively) are also voted into their positions, the positions themselves do not come with the same power components that the moderators and administrators have in that they do not impact upon the ways that other forum users utilise or communicate within the forums. Rather, their roles are primarily concerned with outreach work and wider awareness-raising (the PT) and ensuring the transparency of moderation processes (the DT). It is worth noting, however, that the PT does have the power to gatekeep the forums to some extent, overseeing requests by researchers and the media to access AVEN's members and the forum content. It is clear, then, that the 'staff' roles within AVEN (which are also inclusive of the non-elected web masters (WM), who are in charge of the technical side of the forum platform) embody responsibilities which place them at a higher tier of the AVEN hierarchy but that there is also a hierarchy between the staff when it comes to influence upon community behaviours. As their work does not directly impact upon the identities that AVEN members create, the PT, DT and WM roles are not a focus of this thesis. However, Chapter 6 looks at examples of admod interactions with standard users to consider the impact that such engagements have upon individual identities and the ethos of the forums.

Whilst the staff hierarchy is formalised by the membership structure of the forums, a less formal hierarchy exists amongst the forum's standard users who represent the majority of AVEN's membership and occupy the remainder of the forum hierarchy. This may therefore be a sign that AVEN's hierarchy is not solely of the top-down type suggested by Davies (2005) and actually consists of 'differential levels of status' (Moore, 2006: 612). Whilst we might assume that longer-term members are likely to be seen as being on a higher rung of the hierarchy, with newer users at the bottom, the situation is more complex. Because the AVEN CoP values education as a forum practice, newer members who contribute positively to education efforts within discussions may ascend the hierarchy relatively quickly. A longer-term user who is perceived as contributing negatively, on the other hand, may struggle to

maintain the respect of their fellow users and may in turn be marginalised, losing hierarchical status. These statuses are not overtly expressed within the forums, however, and may not be understood or recognised by all users.

Post counts can also influence positions within the hierarchy. Newer, more frequent posters can potentially establish themselves as valuable contributors more quickly than longer-term, infrequent posters. This is also important when we consider the aforementioned post count voting restriction for AVEN elections as infrequent posters may take much longer to achieve enough status to contribute to decisions about staff positions. These factors again show that duration of membership is not the only factor which influences an individual's position within the hierarchy of the forums and this will be considered further in Chapter 6.

4.5 Summary

These details show that the AVEN forums operate in an egalitarian way but that they are nevertheless subject to a hierarchical structure. This hierarchy enables the forums to monitor user behaviour for the good of the community as a whole and to ensure the protection of its members. As has been indicated, though, users react to this in different ways and the impact of their reactions upon community harmony will be looked at more closely in Chapter 6. Before exploring community engagement, however, Chapter 5 investigates the ways in which members of AVEN define asexuality and what this can tell us about how they understand their identities and how asexuality is framed in relation to the wider allosexual world.

5 Defining Asexuality in an Allonormative World

In this chapter, I look at the ways that my participants, as AVEN members, define asexuality. As my study focuses upon AVEN, it is essential to first consider the organisation's own definition, partly because of its potential impact upon AVEN's members but also because AVEN occupies a dominant position within asexual culture and so its official definition is prominent. However, this definition alone does not capture the array of understandings that individuals have of what asexuality means to them and their community. Indeed, during the ethnographic stage of my research, it became clear that individual members respond to AVEN's definition in varied ways and offer significantly different definitions of their own. The issue of how asexuality is defined was therefore revealed to be an important discussion point, and also a point of tension, amongst AVEN's users.

Chasin (2013) comments that espousing common definitions of asexuality without questioning the assumptions that are fundamental to them has a negative impact upon understandings of asexuality; it can perpetuate old myths and taken-for-granted ideologies of sexual superiority. As such, this chapter considers a range of definitions and what these mean for community cohesion and self-identification. In this sense, this chapter assesses the implications of existing definitions in order to understand the impact that they have upon identities and understandings of asexuality.

My interests here lie in the language that is used to define asexuality and what answers this can provide for the first two of my research questions:

1) How is asexuality defined by AVEN's users and what bearing does this have upon how its members see themselves/ their identities?
2) What impact does (allo)normativity have upon asexual identities/ identifications?

In this sense, this chapter has two main aims. The first is to investigate how asexuality is defined (Section 5.1), including the use of allosexual concepts and negation. The second is to consider the influence of allonormativity upon the linguistic choices that are made. Also relevant is a consideration of the terms used to refer to romantic identities and asexual subcategories (Section 5.2).

5.1 Defining asexuality

This section analyses the definitions given by members of the AVEN community in order to understand common features and their importance or, otherwise, their negotiability. I look first to the organisation's definition, which likely influences the definitions below – this is highly visible, presented at the top of AVEN's website pages, and states that:

> 'An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction' (AVEN, 2022).[8]

The use of the noun phrase 'an asexual person', which acts as the subject of the sentence, frames this definition in terms of asexual people as opposed to asexuality as a concept. This has the effect of personifying the sexuality and, in so doing, highlights it as a personal, lived experience rather than an abstract characteristic, making it easier for readers to relate to. The phrasing is also short and concise, allowing the main aspects of asexuality to be unequivocally presented, making it easily digestible for those new to the concept.

Also of note is AVEN's choice to define asexuality in terms of sexual attraction rather than desire or libido, and the significance of this shall be considered further in Section 5.1.1. The use of 'does not' is likewise significant, framing asexuality in terms of an absent rather than a present attribute (via a process of negation which is discussed further in Section 5.1.2). This in turn suggests that sexual attraction exists as a binary: that is, you either experience it or you do not, leaving no room for the idea that it could be experienced temporally or to greater or lesser degrees. Other pages on the website contradict this, offering caveats which are inclusive of asexual spectrum identities[9] and stating that the scope for inclusivity within asexuality is a semantic debate which is open for discussion on the forums. In this sense, then, the AVEN organisation does not attempt to resolve the discrepancy within its stance but, rather, suggests that this is an issue for the community's members to negotiate. This lends support to my framing of AVEN as a CoP in which members contribute to its inner workings; these issues are considered further below and in Chapter 6.

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[8] The AVEN organisation intended to update this definition to 'An asexual person is someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction' in Summer 2021. This proposal was challenged by some members of the community on account of 'little' being vague and overly inclusive. The proposal for change came about following the end of my data collection and, at the time of writing, the definition on the homepage remains unchanged. As a result, I utilise the original definition here.

[9] The asexual spectrum (often shortened to 'ace-spec') refers to a number of identities which feature very low or diminishing levels of attraction. Although not a *complete* lack of sexual desire or attraction, they are generally perceived to overlap with asexuality more than allosexuality.

For now, I turn to an analysis of the linguistic features commonly used by AVEN members to define asexuality. To elicit this data, Question 12 of my survey asked respondents to ‘Please define asexuality in your own words’ and provided an open-answer format for responses. An analysis of these definitions is provided in Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3, in conjunction with analysis of forum posts selected to further illuminate my findings.

5.1.1 Use of allosexual concepts

As mentioned above, AVEN defines asexuality in terms of sexual attraction. However, this is not the only conceptualisation that is available and my ethnographic research indicated disparity between AVEN’s membership about which terms are most suitable. Looking first at my survey data, Table 1 shows the rate of usage of five categories of terms used within the definitions given in response to Question 12. These categories reflect the range of responses given by my respondents and, where relevant, group together related terms (for example, the first category includes ‘sexually attracted’). It should be noted that respondents did not necessarily perceive the terms to be mutually exclusive and some therefore utilised more than one. My interest here lies in which terms are deemed relevant for defining asexuality and so, where respondents used multiple terms, each is counted in the table but multiple uses of the same term in a response are counted as just one entry. Percentages are calculated in relation to the total number of responses.

Table 1: Terms used to define asexuality

Terms	Responses which included each term	
	Number	Percentage
(Sexual) attraction	79	73.1
(Sexual) desire	30	27.8
Interest (in sex)	17	15.7
Sexual needs/ urges	15	13.9
Sex drive/ libido	5	4.6

Total (n) = 108[10]

[10]This question received 110 responses but two were excluded from this analysis as they did not provide a definition.

This data shows that '(sexual) attraction' was by far the most common choice for defining asexuality, being used in nearly three quarters of responses, whilst the second most common choice, '(sexual) desire', was used in just over a quarter of responses. These terms form the poles in the so-called 'definition debate', which is widely recognised amongst forum members, and so they hold special significance to definitions of asexuality and an analysis of their use is prioritised in the following discussion.

The predominance of 'sexual attraction' amongst the definitions given by my survey respondents mirrors AVEN's official definition and wider discourses of sexuality. The following responses demonstrate how this term was used by my respondents:

(5.1) Does not experience sexual attraction.

(5.2) Asexuality is a sexual orientation where the person who identifies doesn't feel sexual attraction.

(5.3) A lack of sexual attraction.

(5.4) Not sexually attracted to any gender.

For individuals defining asexuality in terms of sexual attraction, the verbs 'experience' and 'feel' were common collocates, as shown in (5.1) and (5.2). In all cases, these verbs were negated, a feature looked at in more detail in Section 5.1.2. As in AVEN's definition, these verb choices indicate the experiential nature of sexual identities, positioning asexuality as something passively experienced rather than actively enacted and therefore not controlled by the individual. This in turn positions asexual people as non-agentive in their experiences of their sexuality. The idea of passivity is also demonstrated in formulations such as (5.3) which place 'sexual attraction' as the object of a prepositional phrase.

In contrast, a minority of cases, such as (5.4), presented 'sexual attraction' as the verb phrase 'sexually attracted' which means that the noun 'sexual attraction' becomes an act. In (5.4), the processual nature of this act is framed in relation to the prepositional phrase 'to any gender' which draws upon the gendered framing of other sexualities and indicates that the relevance of attraction takes meaning from its object. This corresponds to Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle in that the subject's identity takes on meaning because of the object of their attractions, or lack thereof.

Given the prevalence of this term within AVEN members' descriptions of asexuality, defining it influences the CoP's understanding of asexuality and it is clear that AVEN members regularly engage with this concept, with one thread still active ten years after first starting. Many participants of that thread draw upon definitions from the AVEN wiki (2022)[11] which defines sexual attraction as 'an emotional response sexual people feel where they find someone sexually appealing, and often results in a desire for sexual contact with the person'. The use of the noun phrase 'emotional response', and the verbs 'feel' and 'find', again indicate that sexual attraction is not controlled by the individual but, rather, is an automatic reaction to someone deemed sexually appealing. Yet the attribution of sexual attraction exclusively to the noun phrase 'sexual people' shows that asexual people are not expected to experience it. Also noteworthy is the fact that the definition for sexual attraction makes reference to desire; that desire is seen as a potential consequence of attraction serves to highlight the interconnected nature of these concepts.

AVEN wiki in turn defines sexual desire as 'the desire to have sex with someone'. The coupling of 'desire' with the verb phrase 'to have sex' emphasises the physical act of sex as a driving force for desire, whereas sexual attraction is to do with an emotional connection that may lead to that desire emerging. Also key is the inclusion of the subject noun 'someone' which suggests that another person is required for the desire to be satisfied, highlighting the relationality principle at work.

As shown in Table 1, 'sexual desire' was the second most common term used to define asexuality in the responses to my survey, being utilised by just over a quarter of respondents, as exemplified in the following examples:

(5.5) Lacking any inherent desire for sex.

(5.6) Asexuality is the lack of innate desire for partnered sex.

(5.7) Lack of desire to participate in sex with a partner.

[11] As is the nature of wikis, AVEN wiki receives contributions from its membership to build a repository of information which specifically relates to asexuality. It is run by AVEN but it is maintained as a separate website.

The adjectives ‘inherent’ and ‘innate’ in (5.5) and (5.6) were used to premodify ‘desire’ far more commonly than ‘attraction’ and this may be interpreted as a sign that experiencing desire is seen as an essentialised characteristic, something which people are born with, compared to attraction which we may suppose develops. Desire was also more likely than attraction to be modified with a prepositional phrase of the types ‘for sex’, as in (5.5), and ‘to participate in sex’, as in (5.7). These associate a noun, ‘sex’, or a verb phrase, ‘participate in sex’, with the abstract noun ‘desire’, showing that desire gains significance from being directed towards something specific. These definitions therefore distinguish a lack of desire for sexual activity from a lack of desire for the kinds of sexual stimulation which may be satisfied by masturbation. This is a common distinction amongst AVEN members which shall be considered further below in relation to ‘libido’.

Interestingly, half of all mentions of ‘sexual desire’ were coupled with mentions of ‘sexual attraction’ with 11 of those respondents utilising constructions of the type ‘sexual attraction and/or desire’. Whilst it is possible to interpret the use of ‘and/or’ in these examples as a sign that these terms are synonymous, I would argue that, in these cases, it is used to denote two options for defining asexuality – akin to two different measuring scales – which are both deemed valid but which may hold different significance to different people. Thus, I contend that of the respondents who utilised both ‘sexual attraction’ and ‘sexual desire’, none used them as interchangeable synonyms, suggesting that my respondents recognise them as holding distinct, albeit related, meanings. This distinction was also recognised by the original poster (OP[12]) of a thread entitled ‘What is sexual attraction?’ who stated:

> Post 5.1
> *User 5A – 18/01/2012, 1.45PM*
> […] As noted earlier, sexual attraction and sexual desire are two distinct experiences. Meaning, you can experience one and not the other, which also means that you can not experience sexual attraction, whilst experiencing sexual desires, and vice versa. [...]

[12] In online forums, the acronym ‘OP’ can refer to both the ‘original post’ (the first post in a thread) or the ‘original poster’ (the user who started the thread). In my own writing, ‘original poster’ occurs more commonly and so this is what I shall use OP to refer to. ‘Original post’ will be written in full where used.

The explicit delineation between sexual attraction and desire within this post enables the writer to make it clear that these do not have to be experienced together, yet the use of the modal verb ‘can’ in the phrase ‘you can experience one and not the other’ shows that experiencing at least one is a possibility. It is important to note that this post seeks only to explain what sexual attraction is in a broad sense and does not apply this explanation only to the case of asexuality. However, the use of the generic second person pronoun ‘you’ suggests that this user directs their message at the reader who, on an asexual forum, is more likely to be asexual than not. Directing this message to an asexual audience therefore leaves the reader to infer the relevance of these concepts to asexual experiences. Thus, it is possible to interpret this message as an indication that experiencing sexual attraction or desire can be compatible with asexuality, or at least with some asexual spectrum identities, such as akoisexuality[13] and cupiosexuality[14]. These identities are particularly important to considerations of how asexuality is defined as they occupy the so-called ‘grey area’ – that is, the part of the sexual spectrum between the poles of asexuality and allosexuality. Such individuals may therefore not align fully with either asexuality or allosexuality or may align more closely with each at different points.

Whether or not individuals within the grey area feel they have more in common with asexuals or allosexuals is, to some extent, a matter of personal choice. However, the ways in which asexuality is defined can also influence such perceptions, another example of the relationality principle, and explains some choices between ‘sexual attraction’ and ‘sexual desire’. This is outlined in the following post from the AVEN forums. The user was responding to a post asking if a desire for sex, but lack of sexual attraction, is asexual or allosexual. A suggestion of cupiosexuality had already been made to which another user asked whether any asexuals are cupiosexual. This post sought to answer that question.

> Post 5.2
> *User 5B - 29/06/2020, 11.43AM*
> So that's another one of those points that are part of the intense definition debate.

---

[13] Akoisexual – experiencing sexual attraction but not wanting it reciprocated or losing it when it is reciprocated.
[14] Cupiosexual – a lack of sexual attraction but not a lack of desire for partnered sex or sexual relationships.

> People who say that asexuality should be defined as a 'lack of desire for partnered sex' would say that cupiosexuality should be classified as a subtype of (allo)sexual.
> People who say that asexuality should be defined as a 'lack of sexual attraction' would say that cupiosexuality should be classified as a subtype of either asexuality or grey-sexuality.

This user precedes their explanation with an acknowledgement of the definition debate which is prominent within the AVEN community. This draws the reader's attention to the debate, with the definite article 'the' either suggesting that there is only one debate in question or otherwise indicating a shared orientation to the debate, presupposing the addressee's familiarity with it as a community practice. This reference also mitigates their post by implying that the views which follow may not be representative of all users, whilst their non-alignment with either view symbolises a stance of impartiality. Furthermore, their use of the adjective 'intense' clearly indicates that the debate can be heated and emotive, something which foreshadows a sense that some individuals from both sides of the debate feel invalidated by the views of those on the opposite side.

This is important because the dichotomised views that this user describes in the second and third sentences show that the use of 'desire' and 'attraction' to define asexuality have implications for where identities such as cupiosexuality fit within the sexual spectrum. If a lack of desire is characteristic of asexuality then a sexual identity which involves experiences of desire may not be perceived as asexual. If lack of attraction is used instead, that same identity, which does not include experiences of attraction, could legitimately qualify as asexual. Here, then, is a particularly stark example of why the choice of wording used to define asexuality is so important to individuals within the grey-area as it can lead to invalidation or inclusion. This resonates with Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2005) authorisation and illegitimation ToIs in that the ways that individuals and the AVEN community choose to define asexuality can legitimise or illegitimise the asexual identities that others claim. This can both empower and disempower all members of the community; the way this is wielded can tell us a great deal about the structure of the CoP and of the rules which enable it to function (for further discussion, see Chapter 6).

Whilst the definition debate is a mainstay of AVEN culture, there is also evidence that a compromise could be reached via accepting sexual attraction and sexual desire as two options which can be used in tandem. The following post, from a thread in which the OP asked whether their experiences of sexual attraction and masturbation prevented them from being asexual, offers an insightful example of a user who refers to both definitions of asexuality in order to help them to answer the OP's query.

> Post 5.3
> *User 5C – 19/07/20, 8.07AM*
> Asexuality has two equally valid definitions. One is a lack of sexual attraction, which you seem to be unsure about. That's fine! The other definition is a lack of desire for partnered sex. You seem to fit that more accurately. Overall, if you fit one of the two definitions, you can definitely say you're asexual. So if you have no inherent desire for partnered sex, then you're probably asexual. Of course, it's up to you to decide in the end
>

This user begins by acknowledging that there are two different definitions for asexuality but, through using the adverb 'equally' in conjunction with the adjective 'valid', they indicate that neither should be viewed as more important than the other. This is further emphasised by the conditional phrase 'if you fit one of the two definitions', which stresses that only one definition need apply to classify oneself as asexual, and the simple exclamatory sentence 'That's fine!' which invokes a friendly tone and encourages the OP not to be disheartened by either their uncertainty or possibly not fitting the first definition. These features serve to reassure readers, particularly the OP, that not fully fitting with one definition does not automatically invalidate them as asexual. This again relates to Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2005) authorisation and authentication ToIs. By indicating to the OP and other readers that their experiences do fit within certain definitions of asexuality, User 5C authenticates and enables their potential claims to the asexual label. In doing so, User 5C positions themself as having the authority to authenticate identities on account of them having greater experience with the definitions. This in turn implies the existence of an informal hierarchy (the 'differential levels of status' type discussed by Moore, 2006: 216) for giving advice within AVEN with more knowledgeable members able to enlighten those with less experience.

User 5C also provides a brief outline of the two definitions, one phrased in terms of sexual attraction and the other in terms of desire. These are given as generic descriptions which the user then relates specifically to the OP's own situation through the use of the second person pronoun 'you' in the subordinate clause 'which you seem to be unsure about' and the simple sentence 'You seem to fit that more accurately'. These references therefore indicate to the OP that although they may not feel that their experiences fit with the first definition, they do fit more closely with the second. That User 5C then goes on to utilise 'you' again in another conditional phrase, 'So if you have no inherent desire for partnered sex', clearly indicates to the OP that their particular experiences could be seen to fit within one of the two definitions that have been outlined. This again signifies that User 5C adopts the intersubjective role of authenticating the OP's claim to the asexual label and thereby answers the question about whether the OP's experiences make them allo- rather than asexual.

However, the user also, tellingly, ends their response with the declarative construction 'it's up to you to decide in the end' which reminds the OP that, ultimately, only they can decide how they wish to identify. The use of the phrase 'of course', here, presupposes that the OP is already aware of this flagstone AVEN policy for engaging with other forum members (see Chapter 4) and frames User 5C's response as an informative guide rather than a prescriptive declaration of the OP's sexuality. User 5C therefore adopts the role of a guide in this interaction, in accordance with the positionality principle. That they then end their post with a smiling face emoticon also contributes to this idea, creating a sense of informality and friendliness which may be read as encouraging and supporting the addressee to explore their identity further.

Whilst my survey results suggest a preference amongst respondents for defining asexuality in terms of sexual attraction, it is clear from the forum content that many individuals accept the use of definitions which use *either* sexual attraction or sexual desire as their foundation. And yet, debates exist within the AVEN community about whether or not 'sexual desire' is a more accurate term. This is because many advocates of the sexual desire definition believe 'sexual attraction' is too vague and constantly needs to be explained. They therefore deem it inadequate for clarifying the meaning of asexuality, especially as it also relies upon being

defined in terms of sexual desire. Some AVEN members therefore believe that 'sexual desire' is a more straightforward term which adds nuance and removes ambiguity from definitions.

It is therefore clear that defining asexuality in terms of desire could create clarity and accuracy, particularly when community members understand themselves, and come to subdivide the community, on the grounds of their differing desires. The following forum post demonstrates an argument for definitions to be based upon the concept of desire rather than attraction.

> Post 5.4
> *User 5D – 23/04/2020, 5.58PM*
> Ah, here's where we're going to get into definition debate territory again... sigh.
> Yes, it's true, people very often do experience attractions to other specific people. Their partners, crushes, whatever. But sometimes desiring sex isn't about feeling a super special draw to a certain individual. If one actively desires to engage in sexual activity with other people, just because they happen to like sex, that doesn't seem so asexual, does it? Could someone have a super high libido, literal hundreds of casual sex partners, and still claim asexuality? Does that make sense?
> This is why many of us don't really care for the term 'sexual attraction' as a central sticking point in defining asexuality. If someone innately desires sexual activity with other people, for the purposes of their own enjoyment (mental, physical, whatever), then that's pretty much what being sexual is all about. You don't have to be in love with your partner of choice, don't have to find them super hot, etc. Being sexual just involves desiring sex with other people.

Like User 5B, User 5D opens with a reference to the definition debate. Their use of the adverb 'again' indicates that engaging with the debate is a common occurrence, whilst their inclusion of 'sigh' – something which, in online communications, is often used in much the same way as emoticons to symbolise an action (Suler, 2004; Barratt, 2012) – implies that this user finds the debate tedious. This is consistent with Teigen's (2008: 53) findings that, in

social as opposed to private situations, sighs are more likely to be perceived as a sign of 'frustration, boredom, tiredness, or resignation'. This feature therefore allows them to make their view clear whilst also positioning themself as a long term member of the community, familiar with the debate, who has the experience, and therefore authority, to offer advice.

Illustrating the issues raised by the use of sexual attraction as a descriptor of asexuality, User 5D utilises a number of interrogative constructions in the second paragraph to highlight some practices which they believe are problematic interpretations of asexuality. By phrasing these points as questions, they challenge the reader to assess them and, in turn, to question whether sexual attraction is an adequate concept for describing asexuality. For instance, 'that doesn't seem so asexual, does it?' is a leading question which makes the writer's own view on the matter transparent and presupposes that the reader shares or could come to share their view. The tag question 'does it?' interrogates the hypothetical stance laid out in the rest of the sentence, that the practice does constitute asexuality. Thus, the tag question corresponds to what Kimps (2007) refers to as a 'challenging' attitudinal use in that it implies the user's disbelief in or disagreement with the stance, also corresponding to Bucholtz and Hall's distinction and illegitimation ToIs. Kimps notes that challenging attitudinal uses may be supplemented with additional contextual attitudes which, in this case, could be read as sarcasm, contempt or mockery of the idea being challenged. Kimps alludes to this being a face-threatening act and so User 5D's use of it challenges the reader to question their own views and encourages them to adopt the writer's view that attraction is an inadequate term for defining asexuality. These features therefore speak to this user's perception of the centrality of desire to defining asexuality, despite that desire being absent.

User 5D uses the third person inclusive phrase 'many of us' to suggest widespread support for the view, including their own. However, it is also notable that they use the phrase 'don't really care for' to address the feelings that these members have towards the use of sexual attraction as a descriptor. This phrase allows the user to take a stance of disinterest in rather than outright rejection of the attraction definition and, although often used as an intensifier, the adverb 'really' is used in this instance to minimise the force of this disinterest. Therefore, although this user takes an overt stance towards the issue, they soften their critique of the opposing perspective through hedging, suggesting that although they consider this definition problematic, they accept its use by others. In contrast to the use of the tag question discussed

above, this avoids invalidating others and attends to their face needs (Brown and Levinson, 1987) by allowing inclusion. It is also clear evidence of User 5D's awareness of AVEN's policies regarding invalidation and therefore demonstrates their alignment with the terms of the CoP, even where doing so means they must temper their opinions. User 5D's careful negotiation of their own views with adhering to AVEN's terms of service means that they avoid sanctions which could otherwise lead to their marginalisation (as also demonstrated in Thomas, 2005) and so they maintain their full membership of the community (Wenger, 1998).

User 5E also shares User 5D's view that sexual desire is a more accurate descriptor for asexuality than sexual attraction. Although this is not expressed explicitly within the following extract, it is implicit in the way that they show that the desire definition allows them to positively identify with asexuality. This comment is thus a striking example of why the definition debate can be so polarising.

> Post 5.5
> *User 5E – 13/10/2019, 2.24PM*
> I'm aware of the potential conflict between the two most popular definitions of asexuality. I'm not asexual under the official definition, at least if "sexual attraction" is understood as not necessarily leading to desire sexual contact. However, I'm 100% asexual under the most popular alternative definition - "an asexual person is someone who experiences no desire for partnered sex". I don't ever want to have sex, in fact I actively want to never have sex. […]

User 5E's use of the abstract noun 'conflict' to refer to the debate serves to foreground its negative implications via drawing upon connotations of war and bloodshed to imply the damage that the opposing sides may cause. By using their own circumstances, as indicated by the repeated use of the first person pronoun 'I', to assess the impact of the two definitions, this user makes the issue more compelling by grounding it within personal rather than abstract terms. They also contrast their understanding of themself in relation to the two definitions via the declarative constructions 'I'm not asexual' and 'I'm 100% asexual'. That these assessments are polar opposites allows this user to show the stark contrast between the

identities that these definitions enable them to adopt, indicating – in line with Bucholtz and Hall's positionality principle – that their identity may shift, or be shifted depending upon the definitions used in particular contexts. In addition, their use of a percentage to only quantify the degree of their asexuality in the second example highlights this scenario and therefore indicates that defining asexuality in terms of desire is their preference.

These findings show that the definition debate remains an important discussion point within the AVEN community – and one which is evidence of the CoP's collaborative negotiation of identity and adaptability to the changing views of its member's – and that definitions have wide-reaching implications for the inclusion of a range of asexual spectrum identities. However, although sexual attraction and sexual desire are the two concepts through which asexuality is most commonly defined, it is clear from both my survey results (see Table 1) and posts within the AVEN forums that sex drive/ libido is considered a further distinction in sexual experiences and that this, too, factors into some definitions. However, unlike sexual attraction and desire, the presence of a libido is not generally perceived as being at odds with asexuality.

AVEN wiki's (2022) definition of sex drive/ libido is 'a desire to feel sexual pleasure' and this notably contrasts with its definition of sexual desire as 'the desire to have sex with someone'. This suggests that it is the feeling of pleasure itself which is sought in the case of sex drive and that, unlike sexual desire, a partner may not be required for satisfaction to be achieved. Several AVEN members allude to this idea in their posts to a thread on the relationship between libido and sex.

> Post 5.6
> *User 5F – 20/07/20, 9.55AM*
> I have a relatively strong libido but I prefer to deal with it on my own. Sex seems unappealing and boring to me, not inherently rewarding. And too much effort to be worth it when I can do it myself.

> Post 5.7
> *User 5G – 11/07/20, 4.11PM*

> If I have a fairly strong libido, does that mean I would find sex pleasurable? (To be clear, I am not asking if I would desire sex - I know I don't. Just asking if the action of having sex would trigger the same feelings I get when I masturbate.)

Both of these users reference masturbation as a means of satisfying their libido with User 5G doing so explicitly and User 5F utilising the euphemistic phrase ‘I prefer to deal with it on my own’. That User 5F negatively evaluates sex, in contrast to this euphemism, via the adjectives ‘unappealing’ and ‘boring’ and the adjectival phrases ‘not inherently rewarding’ and ‘too much effort’ shows a strong preference away from partnered sexual acts and thereby indicates that their libido can be satisfied independently. The modal verb ‘can’ in the phrase ‘when I can do it myself’ has a similar effect, acknowledging that the individual has the ability to satisfy their libido without the involvement of another person. User 5F therefore disassociates themself from partnered sexual acts and positions themself away from normative sexuality.

Likewise, User 5G’s use of the simple declarative sentence ‘I know I don’t’ in relation to desiring sex demonstrates their certainty that sexual desire is not part of their sexual experiences. That they feel compelled to state this fact to clarify their question about potentially finding sex pleasurable shows they recognise that their libido is a separate experience but one which may be confused for sexual desire. These posts therefore provide evidence of AVEN users distinguishing between their experiences of libido and what they understand of sexual desire as a partnered experience.

This distinction, and the ability for sex drive to be satisfied without a partner, means that many asexuals do not see the presence of sex drive as being at odds with asexuality. Although views on this do differ within the AVEN community, questions are more likely to be raised about the presence of a desire for sexual acts that require a partner; this in turn explains why some survey respondents included the phrase ‘partnered sex’ when outlining practices which asexuals do not desire. The potential for sex drive/ libido to be experienced by asexuals was raised in a small number of the definitions given in response to my survey (see Table 1):

(5.8) You don’t feel sexual attraction to anyone. You might have libido but no attraction.

(5.9) […] I'm sex-repulsed and I lack a sexual drive and attraction.

(5.10) The lack of sexual attraction. For me it also means the lack of a libido.

In each case, the writers constructed attraction and libido as separate entities. (5.8) shows that while this individual rules sexual attraction out of asexual experiences, as made explicit in their first sentence and emphasised by repetition in the final clause of the second, the use of the modal verb 'might' suggests that libido is a possibility. In contrast, (5.9) uses the coordinating conjunction 'and' to indicate that, at least in their own case, sex drive and attraction are equally missing from their experiences. (5.10) creates a similar effect via the use of the adverb 'also' in combination with the verb 'means' to show that they consider a lack of libido to be as important a part of their definition of asexuality as the lack of attraction. The phrase 'for me', however, suggests that this respondent recognises that their own experience may not be the same for all asexuals. These formulations therefore indicate that the extent to which libido factors in to an asexual person's experiences can differ. This in turn points to some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to construct a definition of asexuality which adequately describes the experiences of all members of this community and which therefore hints at the CoP's need to adapt to its shifting membership.

Related to libido, references to sexual needs and urges occurred in 13.9% of definitions provided in response to my survey (see Table 1), including:

(5.11) A person who doesn't experience a need to be sexual with anyone.

(5.12) It is the absence of the need or yearning to be sexually fulfilled

(5.13) Not experiencing the need to/ urge for sexual contact or intercourse

The use of the nouns 'need', 'yearning' and 'urge' characterise sexual fulfilment as something experienced on a primal level (see, for example, Little, 2017) which is beyond the control of sexual people because it is an innate part of their human needs. In stating that these needs are not experienced by asexual people, these respondents position sexual fulfilment as something which asexual people are not required to attend to in their own lives.

This idea is reflected in responses to another of my survey questions which asked whether asexuality had ever led to feelings of being 'free' (Question 21). 66.1% of respondents answered yes and some commented,

(5.14) It is less distracting

(5.15) I've not felt constrained by the need to get laid constantly

(5.16) Not feeling like I have to have sex is freeing

These responses all position sexual needs as detrimental to freedom with 'distracting' in (5.14) and 'constantly' in (5.15) indicating that it places a burden upon time, with the implication that not having to engage with sexual needs releases their own time to be spent on other pursuits (such as hobbies or careers). The use of the modal verb 'have to' in the phrase 'feeling like I have to have sex', in (5.16), suggests that this individual views sex as an unwanted necessity and a mental burden, something done under duress which feels like a duty. Indeed, this is something that many asexuals who engage in sexual relationships, or who did so prior to discovering their asexuality, report feeling. Finally, 'constrained' in (5.15) has connotations of physical restraint and so suggests that this individual views allosexual needs as having physical as well as mental implications.

The final category identified in Table 1, 'interest (in sex)', contains examples such as:

(5.17) Not interested in sex at all.

(5.18) Not being interested in sexual activities with a partner.

(5.19) The lack of sexual or romantic interest.

Many such uses connect the noun 'interest' to sex or sexual acts. This is achieved via the use of prepositional noun phrases such as 'in sex' in (5.17) and 'in sexual activities' in (5.18). As with the use of the prepositional phrases which often accompany 'desire' this shows that 'interest' (or lack thereof) is directed towards something, sexual acts, and gains significance from that connection. Example (5.19) was, in contrast, more unusual in that the noun 'interest' is preceded by the adjectives 'sexual' and 'romantic'. These therefore imbue the noun with its relevance to asexuality, allowing it to stand alone without being directed towards something else. Constructions such as (5.19) therefore obscure the connection between sexual interest and sexual acts, distancing the two and consequently highlighting the fact that sexual acts have no bearing upon asexual identities. Despite this, the reference to 'sexual … interest' shows that even a definition which does not focus upon sex still adheres to the practice of defining asexuality in sexual terms.

My findings so far in this subsection support Cerankowski's assertion that 'the concept of asexuality often becomes subsumed by the language of sexual desire' (2014: 145; discussed in Section 2.1.2.1) as they demonstrate that AVEN members define asexuality using words

from the semantic field of sex. This implies that it is not something distinct and definable in its own right but, rather, that it is something which can only be defined according to allosexual characteristics. These definitions therefore appeal to a presupposed understanding of the discourse of sexual experiences which may, in turn, facilitate understanding of asexuality by setting as a benchmark something which is already well understood, providing familiar concepts upon which understandings of asexuality can be built. In this sense, sexual terminology creates an allonormative frame of reference through which asexuality can be made intelligible to the sexual majority.

Interestingly, though, this frame of reference is not always intelligible to the asexuals who use it. A good example is found in the following forum post in which User 5H attempts to define aromanticism.

> *Post 5.8*
>
> *User 5H – 14/06/2020, 7.40PM*
>
> [...] Aromanticism is a lack of Romantic Attraction, which I define as leading to the desire to have a romantic relationship (I still don't know what that is, I'm Aromantic). [...]

The declarative sentence ‘I still don’t know what that is’, in which the demonstrative pronoun ‘that’ refers anaphorically to either of the antecedents ‘romantic relationship’ or ‘romantic attraction’, shows that this user does not understand the full meaning of some of the words that they use to define aromanticism. They therefore take a stance of unknowing, distancing themself from the concept. They attribute their lack of understanding to their aromantic identity, suggesting by extension that their understanding of this identity could also only be partial. Their use of the adverb ‘still’ also indicates that their lack of understanding has persisted for some time, further reinforcing their claim that the concept of romanticism is, to them, incomprehensible. This post therefore illustrates an issue that many asexuals encounter with defining and explaining their identities: it is difficult to do this accurately, and in a way that they can themselves understand, if they do not have first-hand experience of these feelings.

This in turn raises questions about why asexuals choose to use sexual terms and there is perhaps something to be learned from the concept of assimilationist homonormativity (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013; Section 2.1.2.3) where sexual minorities ‘stake a claim for

their rights through asserting that gay and lesbian individuals are just like their heterosexual counterparts' (Robinson, 2016: 1). Duggan (2002) critiques this view by stating that it results in a reification of heteronormative ideologies and institutions, recognising that they are important to the heterosexual world and seeking equal access to them for sexual minorities. This is often perceived as problematic because it imposes heterosexual ideals onto homosexual lives, leading to homosexual people being expected to embody heterosexual practices and further embedding heteronorms into the ways in which homosexual people are permitted to live. Applying these ideas of assimilationism to the use of allosexual concepts in definitions of asexuality, then: by defining their own sexual identities along these lines, asexuals can stake a claim to equality with allosexuals and consequently assert that asexuality is equally valid as a sexual identity. Yet, this duly reinforces the importance of allonormative ideals which asexuals must respond to. This will be explored further in Section 8.1.2.

Whilst potentially useful then, the use of sexual terminology in asexual definitions speaks to the idea that allonormative ideals dominate society. In discussing the power and dominance that sex has within modern society, Bogaert, a sexologist, comments that, 'It is as if asexuals know that, on some very deep level, sex really matters in society, and therefore their own identities must also be defined by it, even if that identification takes on meaning because it is the polar opposite of sex' (2015: 93). The importance of sex in wider society is a concept that a number of my survey respondents also alluded to when asked about the extent to which asexuality constituted part of their identity (Question 17):

(5.20) How much my asexuality defines me depends on how allonormative any place or situation is.

(5.21) I only really notice my asexuality when outside circumstances force me to.

(5.22) If it were up to me, it would form only a small part of my identity […] I've learned to see it as a reasonably significant part of my identity.

(5.23) It may be less of my identity in an environment when sex is not as prominent.

These responses show that, for some individuals, their asexuality is made more relevant by external allonormative influences rather than their own beliefs. (5.20) indicates this through the use of the verb 'depends' which shows that the degree of allonormativity present directly correlates to the degree to which this individual feels defined by their asexuality. The use of 'only' in (5.21) also shows this, indicating that, were it not for outside circumstances, this

individual would not notice their asexuality at all. Their use of the verb ‘force’ also has connotations of aggression which points to their asexuality being recognised against their will. Similarly, (5.22) precedes their statement, that asexuality would only form a small part of their identity, with the conditional phrase ‘If it were up to me’ which indicates that, in reality, this is not the case and their asexuality does form a significant aspect of their identity but as a result of the perceptions of others. They emphasise this idea with their use of the verb ‘learned’ to show that this is something which is not felt naturally but occurs due to a process of internalising the views of others.

The respondent in (5.23) identified as a student and gave their response in relation to this particular setting in which they described sex as being a ‘major aspect of life at university’. That they feel their asexuality could become a less significant aspect of their life once they are removed from this setting points to the strong influence that the allonormative ideals of university life places upon them.

These statements, and the linguistic techniques therein, indicate that some asexual people see themselves as passive recipients of the will of other people when it comes to being defined by their asexuality. This means that it is often other people, or society in general, that hold the power to determine the extent to which asexuality plays a role in an asexual person’s life rather than the asexual person themselves. This suggests that asexual identities exist in a dialogic relationship with allonormativity, which intersubjectively influences the way in which asexual identities are constructed. Interestingly, though, Response (5.20) implies that the agent that determines their identity is their asexuality itself – as shown by the noun phrase ‘my asexuality’ being the agent of the verb ‘defines’. Nevertheless, this is given its power by the ultimate agent of the allonormative place or situation which they find themself in, as signalled by their use of the verb ‘depends’ which subordinates the first clause to the latter.

These references to a loss of or missing agency therefore create a sense of powerlessness; of asexual people not being allowed to exist as fully asexual beings, despite wanting to, because the allonormative societies in which they live continually impose sexuality onto their lives and insist upon making it a significant part of their identities. As a result, it is perhaps of little surprise that asexual communities such as AVEN are seen to offer a refuge from the allonormative world (see Chapters 6 and 7 for fuller discussions).

The deferral to the language of allosexual experiences and the idea that asexuality is made relevant by the allonormative expectations of society is an example of Bucholtz and Hall's relationality principle. This principle states that 'identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598). This idea has arguably been encapsulated most clearly in studies of coming out experiences in which queer identities are found to be constructed in opposition to normative ideals. Zimman (2009: 71), for example, comments that coming out narratives tell of 'how speakers came to understand their feelings of otherness in relation to normative constructs of gender and sexuality, and how this understanding came to be realized socially as an identity'. Thus, a feeling of being 'othered' comes about in relation to a normative category and then develops into an identity with which the individual can understand themselves.

In the case of asexuality, this concept of relationality manifests in the way that asexual identities are founded upon existing sexual discourses: asexual experiences are described in sexual terms and gain particular significance when contrasted with allosexuality. However, as shall be discussed in the next section, the social meaning which asexuality gains from this relationality is potentially problematic.

5.1.2 Differential degrees of negation

Whilst exploring the use of terms commonly associated with sexuality in my participants' definitions (Section 5.1.1), it became clear that these terms are routinely negated in order to make them applicable to asexuality. Negation is a process of semantic opposition in which an expression, *e*, is related to 'another expression with a meaning that is in some way opposed to the meaning of *e*' (Horn and Wansing, 2020). In the case of asexual definitions, this means asexuality is positioned in opposition to characteristics associated with allosexuality and, thus, is described in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. A key element of AVEN's definition, this linguistic feature was also prominent within the definitions given by its members with all 108 responses to Question 12 of my survey utilising some form of negation.

This was not a topic which I encountered on the forums during my ethnographic work and so this section focuses upon the survey responses.

In investigating the use of negation in definitions of asexuality, I consider how this technique positions asexuality in relation to other identities and what this means for the identities of individual asexuals, as well as of the AVEN community as a whole. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle is again important here as identities are contrasted and compared which inevitably leads to the creation of hierarchies and normativities which consequently impact upon perceptions of those identities.

In particular, Bucholtz and Hall's adequation and distinction ToIs enable subjects to construct identities along the lines of 'social sameness and difference' (2004a: 494). This occurs via the ideological processes of erasure and highlighting which are said to 'often function in tandem to establish interactionally or situationally sufficient alignments and disalignments' (2004a: 495). This means that, in the case of adequation, where sameness is highlighted and difference is erased, a sense of 'sufficient similarity' is created between individuals or groups which enables them to feel connected. In contrast, distinction sees sameness being erased and difference being highlighted, constructing social boundaries between the groups or individuals in question. The impact of these tactics upon asexual identities is considered further in the following analysis of examples of negation.

Looking at the definitions given in response to my survey, a number of different elements were used to negate the sexual terms discussed in Section 5.1.1. The most common choices were the simple negative elements 'not' and 'no', and 'lack' (and its variants), used as either a verb or a noun. Other choices included the noun 'absence' and the prepositions 'without' and 'away from', as well as the prefix 'dis-' which was only used to negate the noun 'interest'. However, these latter three elements were used by only a handful of respondents and so, for reasons of space, I shall not discuss these in detail below and will instead focus upon the most common choices.

My survey data shows that 62 respondents (57.4%) used either 'not' (or '-n't', the contracted form) or 'no', as evidenced in the following responses:

(5.24) Someone who does not experience sexual desire or attraction

(5.25) Asexuality is when you don’t feel sexual attraction

(5.26) A person is asexual when there is no sexual attraction to another person

(5.27) Having no innate desire to have partnered sex.

Haan (1997: 9) describes ‘not’ as the simple negative element ‘whose only role is to change the truth value of the sentence’. In using this element in definitions (5.24) and (5.25), then, these respondents take a sentence which describes allosexuality (such as ‘Someone who does experience sexual desire or attraction’) and, by negating it, make it untrue of allosexuality and true of asexuality. This process not only positions asexuality as the opposite of allosexuality but also, by virtue of representing it with a marked form, positions asexuality as non-normative in relation to the unmarked, normative allosexuality. These examples therefore starkly demonstrate the effects of the relationality principle whereby asexuality acquires social meaning – indeed, it comes into existence – as the inverse of allosexuality.

The use of ‘no’, in definitions of asexuality, serves a similar purpose. However, whereas ‘not’ always precedes a verb in this data set, and is used to change the truth value of the sentence as a whole, ‘no’ always modifies an object noun phrase and typically negates only that element, as in (5.26) and (5.27) where it negates ‘sexual attraction’ and ‘innate desire’ respectively. As a result, definitions which utilise ‘not’ frame asexuality as something which is not experienced whereas those which utilise ‘no’ frame it as something which is not possessed. ‘Not’ was used by four times as many respondents as ‘no’ which suggests a greater tendency for respondents to view asexuality as a negated process than a negated object. However, the use of ‘no’ to negate the object noun phrase also shifts the negation to a later part of the sentence, leaving the preceding verb unnegated and thereby framing the definition in marginally more positive terms.

Use of the word ‘lack’ (and its variants) by 45 (40.9%) respondents, and ‘absence’ which, although used far less frequently (by 5 (4.5%) respondents), serves the same purpose, have even more negative implications. Examples of constructions which use these words include:

(5.28) Lacking any inherent desire

(5.29) The lack of interest in having sex

(5.30) The absence of sexual attraction

(5.31) It is the absence of the need or yearning to be sexually fulfilled.

As in the case of ‘not’ and ‘no’, the negative elements ‘lack’ and ‘absence’ take an aspect of allosexuality (such as having desire or an interest in sex) and mark it as missing in the case of asexuals. However, this is more pronounced in the case of ‘lack’ and ‘absence’ as these words more strongly imply that the missing characteristics are otherwise expected to be present, positioning them, and again allosexuality, as normative. As a result, the difference between asexual and allosexual experiences are highlighted once more. ‘Lack’ and ‘absence’ are also imbued with inherently negative connotations of deficiency and so these elements position asexuality, and by extension asexual people, as deficient, in turn adversely affecting social perceptions of them. The use of the phrase ‘lack of interest’ in (5.29) is also noteworthy because a lack of interest in sex or a loss of libido is often associated with diagnoses of depression (Fried *et al.*, 2016) and hence, the use of this terminology inadvertently reflects and reinforces discourses which pathologise asexuality.

Although all of the definitions given in response to my survey include negation, they differ in the extent to which they posit that a lack of attraction or desire is either total or partial. This adds further nuance to definitions of asexuality and consequently has repercussions for acceptance towards some subcategories under the asexual umbrella. The following examples demonstrate these different formulations:

(5.32) Not experiencing sexual attraction to anyone of any gender.

(5.33) Not interested in sex at all.

(5.34) […] You can be capable of feeling sexual pleasure through masturbation or even intercourse whilst still being asexual, though most who identify as ace have either a very low sex drive or none at all.

(5.35) […] the relative or absolute lack of sexual and/or romantic attraction / desire.

Responses (5.32) and (5.33) frame asexuality in terms of a total lack of attraction or desire. (5.32) achieves this through the use of the determiner ‘any’ and the indefinite pronoun ‘anyone’, which have the effect of ruling out all possibilities except for a null value, whilst (5.33) uses the adjectival phrase ‘at all’ for the same purpose. These features make it clear that some individuals only view a total lack of sexual feelings as characteristic of asexuality.

In contrast, (5.34) and (5.35) indicate that some respondents take a more varied view and consider both a total and partial lack of sexual feelings characteristic of asexuality. Both respondents utilise the coordinating conjunction ‘or’ to indicate that the total and partial options are equally valid. In referencing a total lack, (5.34) again uses the adjectival phrase ‘at all’, this time to add emphasis to the pronoun ‘none’, whilst (5.35) uses the adjective ‘absolute’ to emphasise the totality of the noun ‘lack’ which it modifies. In contrast, when referring to a partial lack, (5.34) makes use of the intensifier ‘very’ in relation to the noun phrase ‘low sex drive’ to place a restriction upon the amount of sex drive which may qualify as asexual, whilst (5.35)’s use of the adjective ‘relative’ sets allonormative experiences of attraction and desire as the benchmark, further compounding the idea that asexuality must be defined in relation to allosexual norms.

Also of note is the use of the adverb ‘though’, paired with the pronoun ‘most’, in (5.34) as this downplays the significance of the statement in the first part of the sentence, namely that asexuals can gain pleasure from masturbation and intercourse. As such, they acknowledge that some asexuals experience sexual pleasure whilst simultaneously pointing out that this is not the case for the majority of asexual people. In recognising this disparity within the community, this individual shows that different experiences exist but emphasises, via the use of ‘most’ to draw attention to which experiences are more common, that asexuality is typically understood as lacking these feelings.

These points relate to Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2005) ToIs as the recognition of different degrees of asexuality within asexual populations is an example of adequation. The inclusion of a partial lack of attraction or desire alongside a total lack highlights the different experiences that exist within asexual populations. That these distinct experiences may be presented as equal, via the use of the coordinating conjunction ‘or’, minimises the perception of difference and creates a sense that these experiences are sufficiently similar to both warrant inclusion under the asexual umbrella, on the grounds that they both constitute non-allosexuality.

This idea of erasing difference corresponds to Anderson’s (2016 [1983]) writing on the suppression of difference as a means of unifying an imagined community (discussed in Section 2.3.2). The practice of accepting different types of asexuality under the asexual

umbrella demonstrates a willingness to band together despite the differences which exist amongst members. Thus, the presentation of different degrees of sexuality as equally valid indicators of asexuality helps to foster community cohesion via promoting a sense of togetherness. This in turn corresponds to Spivak's (1996) 'strategic essentialism' which, in the context of asexuality, can be used to raise awareness of asexual experiences and to organise for recognition of asexuality as a valid sexual identity.

Whereas framing asexuality in total and partial terms brings a quantitative dimension to sexuality, some definitions also draw upon the concept of temporality by stipulating that asexuality is a permanent rather than a temporary experience, as in the following examples:

(5.36) […] the intrinsic and persistent lack of desire for sexual contact with others.
(5.37) Never experiencing sexual attraction under any circumstances.
(5.38) Permanent absence of sexual attraction and/or innate desire.

Here, again, references to desire being 'intrinsic' (5.36) or 'innate' (5.38) indicate a view of sexuality being an essentialised characteristic and not something which can be decided upon or chosen. This undermines the radical feminist interpretations of writers such as Fahs (2010) who argue that asexuality can be chosen for political reasons given its power to challenge heteronormative society and its perceived ability to liberate those who identify with it. These references to innateness, then, reinforce the idea that asexuality is not chosen, helping to support asexual arguments that it is a real and valid sexual orientation and not something which has been made up for political or other purposes. Such formulations therefore correspond to Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2005) because they authenticate asexual identities which are based upon this idea of permanence and innateness whilst simultaneously denaturalising identities based upon the idea of chosen abstinence from sexual acts. This clearly distinguishes asexuality from celibacy, which is chosen, or a medical loss of libido, which may develop as a consequence of a biological condition or medications, thus marking asexuality as an authentic sexual identity.

The use of the adjectives 'persistent' in (5.36) and 'permanent' in (5.38), as well as the adverb 'never' in (5.37), all emphasise a belief that asexuality involves a long term lack of sexual feelings. In this sense, it is positioned as something which does not come and go and which is therefore unlikely to be influenced by external factors. The inclusion of the

prepositional phrase ‘under any circumstances’ in (5.37) similarly stresses this unlikeliness for change to occur to an individual’s sexual feelings. These assertions challenge assumptions, such as those within medical professions which tie a lack of libido to mental health issues, and those by the general public which suggest that a person may just be too young or may not have met the right person yet to arouse their sexual interests. By foregrounding the idea of permanence in definitions of asexuality, then, these respondents highlight this enduring lack of attraction as a key distinguisher between asexuality, celibacy and loss of libido. This is therefore another example of the distinction ToI being used to draw boundaries between members of these groups and to subsequently mark asexuality as a valid sexuality as opposed to a choice or symptom.

This discussion has shown significant variety in the degrees of sexuality permitted by different definitions of asexuality and has also considered the ways that definitions may help to distinguish asexuality from celibacy and medically-induced loss of libido. However, this raises the question of how some subcategories of asexuality then fit within the asexual umbrella which will be explored further in Chapter 6.

5.1.3 The role of allonormativity in defining asexuality

Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 show that, without exception, my survey respondents defined asexuality in terms of its negated relationship to normative allosexual feelings and experiences and this raises the question of how these practices influence perceptions of asexuality and attitudes towards it. The idea of deficiency is particularly interesting when we consider that these definitions were given by self-identified asexuals, the majority of whom view their sexual identities in positive terms (see Bostrom, 2018, for evidence of increasing positivity and self-acceptance within asexual communities). That they nevertheless consistently utilise techniques which define asexuality in negative terms indicates an internalisation of allonormative ideals, imposed upon them by the use of a dominant allonormative vocabulary. As allonormativity takes for granted the presence of human sexuality in all people, it reinforces the need for the AVEN CoP to refer to asexuality as a state of being which exists outside of the norm, and one which needs to be marked by negation in its definition, even by those individuals and groups who view asexuality in

positive terms. In this sense, we see that the AVEN CoP has developed a practice of defining asexuality which acknowledges the ideological prominence of allonormativity

The internalisation of allonormative ideals can ultimately lead asexual people to view their identities as deficient – for example, when asked if their asexuality had ever made them feel a selection of emotions (Question 21), 51.4% had felt 'inadequate', 56.8% had felt 'inexperienced' and 56.3% had felt 'unsure'. As a result, and in terms of viewing AVEN as a CoP, we can see that allonormativity serves as an 'imposed institutional structure' (Jones, 2012: 51) which constrains the practice of defining asexuality and determines how these asexual participants see themselves and the extent to which their asexuality plays a role in their day-to-day lives. Here, then, we see that allonormativity operates on personal, cultural and institutional levels, subtly and overtly shaping the practices of the AVEN CoP. This is most clearly evidenced via the reliance upon sexual terms in definitions of asexuality, even when individuals do not feel that the experiences described by these terms form a particularly large part of who they are or how they live. Thus, utilising negation becomes an essential means of marking asexual experiences as different to allosexual experiences and enables AVEN and its members to carve out a place for themselves via a process of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005). Here, then, we see that AVEN's identity as a CoP hinges upon its offering of an alternative outlook to the dominant ideologies of the allosexual world and this will be explored more fully in Chapters 6 and 7.

We might therefore surmise that defining asexuality in terms of a lack could actually help to bring people, asexual and otherwise, into contact with the label and ultimately help to educate them about asexuality, precisely because of the use of negative and pathologising language. As the following survey responses show, many individuals reported discovering the term 'asexuality' after being concerned by their lack of sexual desire or attraction and researching it as a symptom:

(5.39) […] after googling for lack of sexual attraction or a similar wording about my perceived problems.

(5.40) Searching google for reasons why I didn't like sex

(5.41) I was on some sort of self-diagnosis tour on the internet.

(5.42) Whilst searching the web to find out what was wrong with me.

In referring to ‘perceived problems’ and ‘what was wrong with me’, (5.39) and (5.42) show that these respondents viewed their feelings as defective and negative, whilst (5.40)’s reference to the noun phrase ‘reasons why’ suggests that this individual felt that their feelings warranted investigation which in turn implies that they did not see those experiences as typical. Similarly, (5.41)’s reference to a ‘self-diagnosis tour’ utilises terminology from the semantic field of medicine to draw an explicit connection between their feelings and a belief that these constituted a pathology. These examples indicate that these respondents had internalised the idea that sexual feelings are a normal part of the human condition which resonates with research on internalised homophobia (for example, Jagessar and Msibi, 2015). They also indicate that not experiencing such feelings is believed to constitute a problem which parallels research on the pathologisation of transgender identities (see, for example, Riggs *et al.*, 2019, as well as Anderson, 2019, and Edelman and Zimman’s, 2014, comments on the pathologisation of trans bodies as a route to accessing medical treatment and legal resources). As a result of these feelings, all four respondents sought out information about their experiences online. The respondent in (5.39) specifically states that they utilised a negated phrasing to find the information that they sought and that this ultimately led them to discover the term ‘asexuality’ suggests that this wording was an important factor in allowing such a discovery to occur.

Therefore, although 79.5% of my respondents stated that their asexuality had led them to feel abnormal at some point in their lives (Question 21), it was through the use of pathologising language that they were able to identify and name their sexuality and to then go on to embrace it. In this sense, defining asexuality in sexual terms may facilitate encounters with the label and subsequently enable the uninitiated to come across it.

Nevertheless, this practice feeds back into the pathologising discourses of texts such as the DSM (see Chapter 1), as well as common public narratives, framing asexuality in terms of being a lack of the characteristics associated with so-called ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ sexuality. This brings me to a consideration of Flore’s comment that asexuality needs to be made ‘intelligible without referencing sexuality’ (2014: 29). This call, to define asexuality in its own terms and to remove allonormative sexuality as the benchmark upon which asexual identities must be constructed, draws parallels with works which argue for bisexuality to be constructed outside of the heterosexual-homosexual binary (see, for example, Angelides, 2001, 2006; Garber,

2000; and Gurevich *et al*., 2009), and also relates to queer linguistic works on homonormativity, as mentioned in Section 5.1.1. This is because it recognises that normative ideals shape the language that is available for defining asexuality and therefore defining it in its own terms could provide some relief from those expectations for asexual people. This endeavour parallels queer linguistic works (such as Leap, 2011; discussed in Section 2.1.2.3) which have challenged the reinforcement of normative ideals by probing the ways in which normativities are constructed, subsequently seeking to destabilise the power that normativities exert upon sexual minorities. Relating this to the definitions of asexuality given by AVEN members, it is clear that the routine negation of allonormative concepts creates a normative means of defining asexuality. This leads to a reification of the importance of those concepts to the allonormative world and consequently replicates this importance within asexuality as well, inevitably resulting in asexuality becoming marked as non-standard and pathologised.

However, despite Flore's (2014) argument for a reconceptualisation of asexuality in more positive terms, and the clear benefits demonstrated by Leap (2011) when such a reconceptualisation takes place, it is less clear that AVEN members agree with this need. My survey respondents' widespread use of sexual terminology when defining asexuality instead suggests a degree of ambivalence towards this idea, with sexual terminology accepted as either useful or necessary for describing the experience of being asexual. This in turn points to the insidious power of allonormativity to subtly influence asexual identifications without being challenged.

Nevertheless, it is clear that some members do demonstrate similar views to Flore, with one respondent stating that:

(5.43) […] to truly understand asexuality, you must not be thinking in terms of sex […]

The use of the adverb 'truly' here implies that defining asexuality in sexual terms can only ever result in a partial understanding whilst the use of the negated modal verb 'must' consequently obligates finding new ways to define asexuality. This corresponds to Cerankowski's argument that 'the concept of asexuality often becomes subsumed by the language of sexual desire, a language system so structured around sex that it limits the ways in which asexuality can be talked about and understood' (2014: 145). These views suggest that sexual language can not only be pathologising but can also hinder the giving of an

accurate account of asexuality. Thus, we see that defining asexuality in sexual terms has the effect of constraining asexual identities. This, in turn, has implications for the ways in which asexual people view themselves and their place within the world, potentially also impacting upon the ways in which they interact with the world around them and negotiate a place for themselves alongside other sexual identities.

This therefore raises questions about how to describe asexual experiences and identities in a way which can present them more affirmatively and with less reference to pathologising discourses. However, although several writers have made reference to the issues incurred by describing asexuality in sexual terms (for example, Flore, 2014, Cerankowski, 2014, and Decker, 2014), the literature offers little in the way of suggestions for alternatives. Indeed, it is possible that asexuality can only be defined in this way because, without the pressure exerted by allosexual society to define humans in sexual terms, asexual people would be less likely to draw on sexual concepts or narratives at all. This is akin to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), but more extensive in that it constitutes compulsory allosexuality (Przybylo, 2019). We might therefore hypothesise that, outside of a sexualised society, asexual people might choose to categorise and define their connections with others through different means. This could in part explain the adoption of a vast array of terms for romantic, aesthetic and sensual attraction types amongst asexual communities, particularly those which indicate an attraction to aspects other than body type or gender, such as intellect (sapiosexuals and sapioromantics). These help to shift the focus of labelling ones sexual identity away from traditional conceptualisations of attraction and desire as being centred around the body. Instead, they emphasise other aspects which are more relevant to the individual describing themselves, and which can therefore be referred to in an affirmative rather than negated way. The use of sexual and romantic identity labels is therefore considered further below.

5.2 Sexual and romantic labels

Having looked at how asexuality is defined and having considered the impact that this has upon the identities that individuals assume within the AVEN context, it is important to now consider the labels that are used within AVEN. Labelling is an important concept in the AVEN community and one which is vilified as well as embraced. As shown in Section 5.1,

the labelling of different sexual and romantic identities is intimately linked to defining asexuality as the specifications of different definitions mean that some identities may or may not classify under the asexual umbrella. This can result in exclusion and so it is important to consider this further in the context of the AVEN community.

One reason that labelling is such an important concept is to do with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) emergence principle. This argues that identities are social and cultural phenomena which emerge as a product of language use and, in this sense, labels provide a means with which identities can be realised. That is, they bring identities into being and create a locus around which to orient and organise.

The significance of labelling in general terms is encapsulated by Sajjad (2018: 41) who states that 'labels transform realities' and also by Retzlaff (2005: 610) who writes that labelling can have 'real-world-consequences' and adds that 'How people refer to themselves, or are referred to by others, shape not only their own perception but also other people's view of who they are'. These comments show that labels are not inconsequential but, in fact, have a definable impact upon the lived experiences of the people and groups that use labels or have labels used against them. This therefore indicates that labels have a significant role to play in power relations, with Sajjad stating that people 'may use them to influence how issues and categories of people may be treated in different contexts and at different points in time' (2018: 45). In this sense, labelling can enable people to enact control over others. It is therefore clear that looking into the labelling practices of AVEN members, as well as of their attitudes towards labels, has the potential to shed light not only upon how individuals identify but also upon how the community and its members police the identities of others.

Although the distinction between different attraction types – the split attraction model (Jas, 2020) – is not unique to asexuality, being able to recognise and label them is particularly relevant to asexuals because their attractions often do not match (something referred to as a 'cross orientation' or 'varioriented', by the Ace Community Survey, 2022). Thus, identifying and naming these different aspects become important foci when coming to understand one's asexuality as well as how one's experiences fit with those of the rest of the community. This relates to Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) positionality principle which contends that identities are made up of multiple layers including macro social categories, local culturally specific

categories and temporary roles specific to the moment of interaction. Being able to recognise and name the different aspects of an asexual person's sexual and romantic identity work therefore corresponds to the local culturally specific level of positionality, enabling the macro category of 'asexual' to be subdivided along lines which are culturally significant to the community. Indeed, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) state that these are often the categories that language users will orient to (however, Section 7.2.3 includes examples of the avoidance of this when coming out) and, thus, these categories in AVEN allow individuals to more precisely categorise their identities and illuminate the diversity and complexity of the community as a whole.

The split attraction model is widely embraced by asexual communities such as AVEN. Carrigan *et al*. (2014: 1) refer to these categories as being 'one key distinction' between members of the asexual population and they represent important means for individuals to come to understand themselves. Indeed, when I asked my survey respondents whether or not they felt it was important to distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction (Question 15), 91.2% of respondents (104 individuals) stated 'Yes'.

When asked to elaborate on this answer, many reasoned that separating romantic and sexual desire aids clarity of expression and increases precision:

(5.44) […] we have words that allow precision in this area it makes sense to use that precision. Think of the messy state "love" is in where addiction, attraction, alignment, pride, family bonds, friendship, lust, passion, and patriotism all get clumped together into one word as if they all meant the same thing. […] Let's please use the two words so everyone understands when we are talking about what.

(5.45) […] one word may not be enough to tell the whole story.

(5.46) […] It's like an engineer moving from a tape measure accurate to 1/4 inch to a laser reader accurate to nanometers.

Response (5.44)'s use of the verb phrase 'makes sense' shows that this individual believes that using the split attraction model is a good idea because it involves a degree of logic. By extension, this implies that not using this precise terminology would be illogical. They highlight this idea further by using the example of the word 'love' to show that the myriad types of love cannot all be represented with the one word. By using the adjective 'messy' to

refer to the problems that could be encountered if only one word was used, this individual posits that multiple specific terms enable clearer communication. They then use the adverb 'please' within the imperative construction 'Let's please use the two words…' to beseech the reader to aim for clarity. Although the intended reader in this case was me, the researcher, the use of the first person plural subject pronoun 'we' and the object pronoun 'us' (in the contracted form '-s') suggests that this respondent's message is actually directed towards the asexual community with non-community members invited to support this ideal. This respondent therefore takes a stance of advocation and activism. By advocating for the use of these locally salient labels, they show that these terms enable nuance, something which could speak to a desire to respect the different experiences of the community's members. This in turn suggests that this respondent, and the community for which they speak, value tolerance and embrace difference and this consequently authorises and authenticates the use of these categories.

By contrast, Response (5.45) is less direct in recommending the use of the split attraction model. It pinpoints the potential consequences of not using the model with the modal verb 'may' suggesting that although one word could be enough for some people, for others, it would not be. The use of the adjectives 'enough' and 'whole' similarly imply that utilising only sexual or romantic attraction could potentially give a partial account of a person's identity. The recognition of multiple perspectives therefore acknowledges that the split attraction model might not be beneficial to all but similarly implies that it should be respected for those for whom it does provide useful concepts. It is important to note here that, in accordance with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) partialness principle, it is impossible to ever give a complete picture of one's identity within particular moments of interaction. However, Response (5.45) shows that individuals nevertheless strive to give as complete a picture as possible and that, in terms of sexual identity, the split attraction model helps to achieve this.

The engineering analogy used in (5.46) also provides a striking demonstration of why clarity is important. By presupposing that the reader is aware of the quality and safety implications which rest upon the accuracy of engineering projects, this individual uses a simile, as indicated by the conjunction 'like', to demonstrate the importance of aiming for accuracy when describing sexual identities too. Whilst it would be unreasonable to suggest that this individual implies that inaccurate sexual labelling could have safety concerns, their use of

this analogy nevertheless clearly alludes to the benefits of accurate labelling, in turn advocating for its use.

These comments demonstrate the perceived benefits that precise labelling can bring to asexual identities but labelling can also be used for other purposes. In her work on the political impact of the labels that are applied to refugees and immigrants, Sajjad states that ‘The purpose of labels is to simultaneously impose boundaries and define categories, while having classificatory and regulatory functions’ (2018: 45). This has clear legal implications in the case of immigration, impacting both the legal status of individuals and public and institutional perceptions of their needs and rights, but these ideas also extend to the use of labels for sexual and romantic identities. This is because labelling these identities also serves to create boundaries between different experiences and feelings which can in turn be used to include and exclude characteristics. This means that those engaging in the AVEN CoP’s shared practice of learning about and coming to understand their sexual and romantic identities have a means of identifying others who share their experiences and of pinpointing where they fit within the community. This again corresponds to Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) relationality principle in that new community members can assess their burgeoning identities in relation to those of other individuals and can subsequently construct their new identities around established models (see Chapter 6).

The use of labels to comprehend one’s identity and place within the asexual community is something which many of my participants find particularly valuable because it helps them to validate their experiences and to feel accepted. In this sense, labels serve to authenticate an individual’s identity, creating an abstract but socially tangible reference with which they can understand and present themselves to others. Indeed, this may explain the proliferation of romantic and sexual labels which are found within the asexual and AVEN communities. On this theme, Schudson and van Anders (2019: 357) write that ‘The creation of new forms of sexual and gender self-labelling might be one means through which AQTYP [Asexual, Queer and Trans Young People] multiply and expand the range of imaginable, livable relationalities and ways of being in the world’. In this sense, identity labelling within communities such as AVEN allows individuals to carve out a place for themselves and solidify their identities. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

However, whilst it is clear that the AVEN CoP is significantly in favour of the use of the split attraction model, there is still some resistance towards the vast array of terms that fall within these categories. Of the most prominent reasons for this are the perceptions that too many identity labels can cause confusion and can lead to asexuality not being taken seriously. In relation to online Tumblr posts about asexuality, Szuba (2018: 40) noted that 'the more terminology-based and obscure the discussions are, the more people struggle to communicate and the more they are unable to come to a consensus'. This can be particularly true of discussions with people from outside of asexual communities where non-members may be unfamiliar with the terminology that is used by the community and may therefore dismiss the community and asexuality as being unnecessary or made up. Thus the array of terms used to describe asexual attractions can offer improved clarity to asexual individuals but may otherwise obscure their messages outside of their communities.

In relation to this, some users also question the need to use labels at all. The following post was written in response to an OP who reported being uncertain about their identity, having used a number of sexual labels without feeling that any truly fitted. This uncertainty led them to question their feelings and to seek advice on how to stop caring about their identity so that they could feel more at peace.

> Post 5.9
> *User 5I – 11/09/20, 12.30AM*
> You are how you are. You don't need a label to accept yourself and even be glad of how you are. I know a lot of people do get those aha moments and it means a lot to them to have a label, and that's great for them, but is it really that important? […]

By beginning their post with the simple declarative phrase 'You are how you are', User 5I makes it clear that the OP will not be able to change their feelings to suit the labels they come across. This statement, which essentialises the OP's identity, could be viewed as limiting and potentially alarming to an individual who hoped to be able to change themselves. However, User 5I makes use of this fact to underscore the message in the rest of their post that the OP should not feel disheartened by not yet having a label that they identify with. They negate the modal verb 'need' in the second sentence to stress to the OP that having a label is not

necessary for self-acceptance, thereby both authenticating and authorising (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) the OP's label-less identity. They nevertheless temper this statement with their acknowledgement that 'it means a lot' to some people to have a label but then use the interrogative 'but is it really that important?' to encourage the OP to question their own perceived need for a label. The use of the intensifying adjective 'really' helps to stress their own uncertainty about the importance of labels and therefore further encourages the OP to see their situation differently. These features seem intended to reassure the OP that their situation does not have to be viewed as problematic and encourage them not to feel burdened by the idea of having to find a label for themselves. In this sense, User 5I demonstrates an aspect of the positionality principle, adopting a temporary role as a negotiator between the OP's conflicted mindset and an idealised end goal of their self-acceptance.

This user's questioning of the relevance of identity labelling ties in with Schudson and van Anders' (2019: 363) observation that attempting to label oneself is a 'process of fulfilling the normative expectation to find a 'proper label'' and succeeds in '[reifying] the compulsory nature of sexual self-labelling'. By questioning the OP's need to find a label for themselves, User 5I challenges this perceived obligation for people to label themselves sexually and consequently destabilises the normative expectations which commonly make labels so sought after. Whilst other examples above have shown that finding the correct label for oneself can be liberating and enlightening, User 5I suggests that where this search starts to feel burdensome, there is no obligation to continue searching. Thus, we see that although normative expectations of sexual labelling drive individuals to seek labels of their own, the AVEN CoP's ethos of exploratory self-identification accepts that this may not always be possible and consequently encourages individuals to explore their identities without feeling constrained by a need to fit into a particular category. This therefore suggests that identity construction within AVEN is positioned as fluid and unbounded – as a process of discovery rather than an end goal – with labels designed to help individuals to build an understanding of their sexuality. It is also an example of collaborative identity construction which is a practice typical of the AVEN CoP.

5.3 Summary

This chapter has shown that the use of sexual concepts and negation within definitions of asexuality relate asexual experiences to those of allosexuals. In so doing, asexuality is rendered comprehensible to the allosexual world, enabling asexuals to authenticate their identities. However, these definitions also construct asexuality *in opposition to* allonormative ideals, allowing asexuality to be marginalised and marked as deficient. There is therefore a tension between the positive and negative implications of defining asexuality in sexual terms, meaning that definitions cannot satisfy all corners of the AVEN CoP. Indeed, my analysis has shown that even amongst a community which strives for tolerance, subtle linguistic choices within members' definitions can impact upon the inclusion and exclusion of the many different identities which may be included under the asexual umbrella. That this array of identities is widely acknowledged but not always accommodated is symbolic of the community's complexity and the tensions which exist between its members as they try to negotiate their own identities and a place for themselves within the AVEN CoP.

In the following chapter, I will expand upon these findings and will consider the ways in which practices within the AVEN community contribute towards the creation of a shared identity. This will involve a consideration of how members negotiate their varied identities and understandings of asexuality in relation to one another and how users orientate towards the community.

6 Belonging and Community Engagement

As discussed in Section 2.3, communities, in a general sense, are intrinsically linked to identities because they influence the types of identity which are permissible and intelligible to community members. This means that interactions within communities shape the identities that individuals construct, and these individual identities in turn shape the community's collective identity. Although touched on in Chapter 5, this chapter explores in more detail the collaborative construction of the AVEN CoP's identity, with consideration given to how this forms a contextual backdrop for the construction of individual member identities in particular moments of interaction. Whereas Chapter 5 showed that AVEN members often contradict and question AVEN's official definition of asexuality, this chapter shows that practices within the forums nevertheless influence, and are influenced by, the ways that individuals orientate towards the AVEN organisation, interact with one another and construct their identities. In this sense, this chapter explores the issue of being an AVEN member rather than being asexual itself and this is an important focus because, as shall be shown, the community is an important site for validating identities, reassuring individuals that their experiences are normal, and offering a safe space.

Interactive exchanges are therefore central to this chapter and an analysis of the forum posts offers the best means of investigating this co-construction of an AVEN identity. However, just as Jaffe (2014) found that reflexive interviews with participants helped to illuminate her ethnographic observations, it is also important to draw upon the reflexive accounts generated by my survey participants. These provide insight into the motivations behind engagement with the forums, giving useful context for understanding how interactions impact upon the identities of AVEN's users. In analysing these features, I draw upon Bucholtz and Hall's ToIs (2004a, 2005; Section 2.2) and CoP theory (Section 2.3.1) to investigate the ways in which identity and community involvement coalesce.

CoP theory in particular enables me to investigate how the AVEN CoP functions, and how members engage with one another and the community's ideologies. Issues of membership, such as peripherality and marginalisation as well as hierarchy and legitimacy, are key to identifying how power relations facilitate and constrain interactions and progression through

the community's structure, and also shed light upon the identities that CoP members construct. This chapter therefore focuses upon my third and fourth research questions:

3) How do individuals negotiate their asexual identities in such a diverse community?
4) What influence does the structure of the AVEN community of practice have upon the identities that members adopt?

The chapter begins by looking at how members build a shared AVEN identity via validating and supporting one another (Section 6.1.1) and engaging in the forum's debate culture (Section 6.1.2), with the community's hierarchical structure shown to impact upon such interactions. Also important is an investigation of how interactions between AVEN's members and moderators may challenge traditional notions of hierarchy and power in CoPs (Section 6.2).

6.1 Building a shared AVEN identity

In order to investigate the ways in which AVEN's members construct their identities through their engagement with the forums, it is important to consider the motivations that members have for using the forums. This provides insights into what members hope to achieve through their forum usage which can in turn explain their approach to engaging with the forums' rules and other members. To this end, Question 24 of my survey asked, 'For what purposes do you use the AVEN forums and do you feel that AVEN satisfies these purposes?'. The discussions in this section draw upon the answers to this question and find that users feel that AVEN enables them to gain support for themselves and to support others; to interact socially with other asexuals; to share experiences and information; and to debate asexual concepts. That the responses to this question can be grouped into these loose categories, and that these subsequently correspond to the AVEN organisation's stated aims for the website and forums (Section 4.1), suggests the AVEN CoP's internalisation of a distinct set of shared endeavours (Wenger, 1998) which guide and facilitate the membership's interactions with the forums and one another.

6.1.1 Validation and support

One of the most common reasons given for joining AVEN is to seek validation of asexual experiences. Supporting members in this endeavour is fundamental to the AVEN organisation's aims and their Terms of Service (ToS) encourage affirmative behaviours whilst prohibiting behaviours which may be invalidating. As a result, the CoP's shared practices reflect these guidelines and many of its members acquiesce to these expectations. The following survey responses comment upon why this supportive ethos is a valuable aspect of AVEN's culture and the analysis of these illuminates the practices demonstrated in forum posts where such support is given.

(6.1) I have used AVEN to reassure myself. When I first signed up I was petrified of myself as an ace and so made a post calling out for help. Everyone responded so supportively.

(6.2) […] logging on to aven shows me that I am not alone and that it is a real thing.

(6.3) […] This was the first place I found when I originally started my search for information and I keep coming back because it normalizes my experiences.

Response (6.1) uses the adjective 'petrified' and the verb phrase 'calling out for help' to show that discovering their asexuality was a difficult experience for this individual, thus justifying their need for help. That this call for help received a supportive response, intensified by 'so' and attributed to the collective pronoun 'everyone', indicates that offering support is commonplace in the AVEN CoP and speaks to the idea that this is a practice which constitutes part of the CoP's shared repertoire of actions and which is therefore learned by community members and encouraged by the community as a whole. This is, in turn, likely to lead to users feeling more at ease with asking for help when they need it.

Response (6.2) uses of the noun phrase 'a real thing' to frame asexuality as something tangible, something which can be pinpointed and named, and this can be particularly important to identification as it provides a solid foundation upon which the individual can understand themselves. The adjective 'real' also speaks to the concept of authenticity and thereby positions the AVEN CoP as having the power to authenticate asexual identities. This is particularly striking when we consider AVEN's reputation as the biggest and most widely cited asexual organisation (discussed in Chapters 1 and 4) as this demonstrates its influence

which in turn supports its prominent position within asexual culture. Interestingly, though, the phrase ‘logging on to aven’ identifies the *act* of accessing the forums as being the source of discovering the authenticity of this respondent’s sexual identity, thereby giving themself agency in the process of identification by indicating that they actively pursue information and advice.

These comments also imply that individuals may struggle to understand their experiences until they encounter terms which describe them. Examples of this can be found in psychological studies, such as Riggle *et al*. (2016: 56), who commented that an individual ‘may disclose an LGB identity but not feel very authentic because a particular label does not adequately describe or convey one’s own sense of self and sexual identity’, suggesting that ill-fitting labels can prevent feelings of authenticity. In this sense, such labels may be adopted strategically, as a closest rather than perfect fit. Similarly, Schudson and van Anders (2019: 360) found that a participant’s discovery of the bisexual label ‘allowed her to articulate her desires as constitutive of an intelligible form of personhood’, indicating that only the correct label results in a true understanding of the self. In the case of AVEN, then, finding a label that clearly defines an individual’s own experiences (as discussed in detail in Chapter 5), and having that label legitimised by the AVEN CoP as the respondent in (6.2) attests, enables them to view those experiences as constituting an identity. This in turn enables rejection of or identification with asexuality as a macro-level demographic category and with others who also feel that it applies to them. Thus, having access to a community-verified name for their asexual experiences subsequently enables individuals to explore those experiences more deeply and to connect with others who can help them to do so.

On a similar theme, Response (6.3) endorses the idea that the AVEN community challenges allonormative ideologies via the use of the verb ‘normalizes’ in reference to their experiences. This suggests that the forums provide an environment in which experiences that are stigmatised in the wider world can be accepted and framed in a more positive and normalised way. The conjunction ‘because’ is used to show that this normalisation is the reason for their continued use of the forums, as indicated by the verb phrase ‘keep coming back’. These features are therefore testament to the power that the AVEN CoP has to queer allonormative ideologies and to subsequently improve the lives of its users by showing them

new ways to understand their own sexualities and to alter their perceptions of how these impact their lives.

One area of discussion which is particularly relevant to queering allonormative ideologies is found in a subforum entitled 'For Sexual Partners, Friends and Allies' (FSPFA). Whilst the AVEN forums predominantly cater to the needs of asexual people, this subforum is designed to give non-asexual people space to seek validation of their experiences of relationships with asexuals or advice on how to accommodate and compromise with the needs of their asexual contacts. The following post was made in response to a thread from this subforum in which the original poster (OP) described some tensions in their relationship with an asexual partner who did not wish to have sex although the OP did. The OP stated that they wanted to find a way to make their relationship work but rejected subsequent suggestions that they could consider an open relationship to satisfy their sexual desires. This non-monogamous practice is at odds with allonormative expectations of monogamy in relationships and so its suggestion here encouraged the OP to think outside of traditional conceptualisations of their relationship. User 6A then offered the following advice (note that posts such as this are particularly noteworthy as they demonstrate that the supportive ethos of the AVEN CoP is inclusive of non-asexual users):

> Post 6.1
> *User 6A – 19/12/2020, 1.08AM*
> [Quoted OP's post about not wanting an open relationship]
> I mean this gently, [OP's username], but the only way of successfully resolving this situation will involve doing something that you don't want to do right now. You do not want to settle for charity sex, you do not want to live sexless, you do not want to leave, you do not want to open. And I have the utmost sympathy. None of those are pleasant options. You have every right to grieve, to be angry, to be terrified, to feel hopeless. Those are the normal, natural reactions to such a situation. […]

User 6A presents a difficult reality for the OP, that resolving their situation will necessarily involve doing something that they are unhappy about, with the adjective 'only' emphasising that they will have no choice in the matter if a resolution is to be found. This honesty is

typical of responses across the forums but is particularly true in the FSPFA subforum where providing advice for people who may be less knowledgeable about asexuality is routine. However, User 6A demonstrates awareness that this is a challenging message, and one which may inadvertently cause harm, by attempting to soften their words with the phrase 'I mean this gently' which indicates that they do not wish to hurt the OP. In this sense, User 6A adopts a caring persona, via respecting the OP's feelings, whilst simultaneously taking on an authoritative or expert stance by which they guide the OP towards difficult decisions.

Similarly, User 6A highlights the variety of issues that the OP has reported, utilising the construction 'You do not want to + verb' four times in quick succession to highlight the contradictory nature of the OP's options. However, they take a non-judgemental stance towards their ideals by sympathising with the OP. They acknowledge that the options the OP has are unpleasant and they express a personal connection to the OP's stance via the use of the first person pronoun 'I' in the simple declarative sentence 'And I have the utmost sympathy', in which the adjective 'utmost' emphasises the extent of their agreement. Although User 6A identifies as a romantic demisexual, these attempts to empathise with the OP and to recognise the difficult choices that they face, serve to adequate their differences in order to prioritise the fulfilment of their shared goal, uniting them as two individuals who seek to resolve the OP's situation. This example therefore illustrates that the aim of resolving issues is paramount to the AVEN CoP culture and can therefore be considered a shared practice amongst CoP members.

User 6A then goes on to further validate the OP's feelings via the use of the affirmative phrase 'You have every right…' which is followed by four examples of the construction 'to + verb phrase' which acknowledge feelings previously expressed by the OP within the thread. The inclusion of this sentence therefore gives weight to the OP's feelings and allays the fears expressed in their first post that they could be selfish to feel this way. This idea is then further stressed in the final sentence of this extract via the use of the adjectives 'normal' and 'natural' to modify the noun 'reactions', indicating that these feelings are not a sign that the OP has a defective personality but rather that they are inherent and understandable responses to their situation. These adjectives also allow User 6A to position themself as knowledgeable enough to determine what constitutes normality, likely as a result of being an experienced AVEN user, and that they therefore have the expertise and authority to assess the OP's reactions as

unproblematic. That these attempts to validate the allosexual OP's experiences come from a user who identifies on the asexual spectrum is significant because it not only indicates an attempt to validate the OP's experiences but also suggests that User 6A does not feel that their own identity has been invalidated by the OP's difficult feelings. This ready acceptance again serves to downplay any possible divisions between their identities and experiences. This in turn indicates that User 6A, and by extension the AVEN CoP, accepts the existence of difficult topics and views within the community's midst, even where these may inadvertently present asexuality as being the cause of an allosexual person's difficulties. This suggests that the right to challenge asexuality within the forums is not reserved solely for those identifying as asexual, indicating that users such as User 6A do not view themselves as hierarchically superior on account of their sexual identities (Section 6.1.2, however, offers an example where this seems not to be the case).

Looking back to the survey responses, several respondents discussed the value of AVEN's supportive atmosphere during times of need but also indicate that their motivations for using AVEN may change throughout their time on the forums:

(6.4) I have used AVEN to look for answers to my own questions and also to help other people answer theirs

(6.5) I used it initially to help me with my identity. […] Now I use AVEN as a way to talk to other asexuals and make friends from around the world. […]

(6.6) I have also used it [the forums] in difficult times to crowdsource a solution to a problem I'm having

For many respondents, participating in the AVEN CoP is as much about giving support as receiving it and these two purposes were often dichotomised with the coordinating conjunction 'and' to indicate that they are equally as important, as in the case of Response (6.4). This indicates that users are aware of each other's needs and that being able to offer support is an important part of community life. This, in turn, is reflected in the aforementioned AVEN practice of having posts in purely social subforums not contributing towards post counts (see Section 4.1). In this sense, status is achieved via contributing towards other people's experiences as well as one's own, in turn highlighting the relational and interactional nature of the community. Achieving such status may then give users a sense

of authority to adopt expert stances, of the kind discussed in relation to Post 6.1, within interactions.

On the topic of the interactions which users engage in, many respondents indicated that although they had joined the forums with a particular purpose in mind (often related to finding support and/or information), since joining, their aims had changed (often towards being social and providing support and information to others). Response (6.5) demonstrates this idea, with the adjective ‘initially’ and the adverb ‘now’ symbolising a difference between their past and present usage of the forums. This relates to the idea discussed in Section 2.3.1.1 that members of a CoP are subject to trajectories of membership (Wenger, 1998). In the case of the AVEN CoP, this takes the form of members moving inwards towards the centre of the community, gaining the experience necessary to be able to support others and educate them in the knowledge and practices at the heart of the community. This represents a kind of ‘giving back’ whereby members who have previously been helped to understand their own asexuality and experiences gain the expertise to allow them to ascend AVEN’s hierarchy, in turn giving them the ability and the power to help someone else to do the same (although not all individuals will ultimately choose to utilise this power). AVEN CoP members therefore form a tight-knit community which bears similarity to the surrogate or de facto families sometimes attributed to gay communities (see, for example, Nardi, 1999 and Levitt *et al.*, 2007) and continuing AVEN’s overarching aim of offering support to asexuals.

Looking at Response (6.6), the reference to the verb ‘crowdsource’ is noteworthy as this suggests that members of the community may come together to offer support, filling gaps in each other’s knowledge and building upon eachother’s contributions to ensure that a solution can be reached. This reliance upon each other to generate worthwhile information therefore tallies with Wenger’s (1998; see also Section 2.3.1.1) theory that a communal memory exists within CoPs. This suggests that individual CoP members do not need to be familiar with all aspects of the community’s knowledge or resources in order to be valued members of the community because the community as a whole can generate the relevant information between themselves. This also means that members need not have achieved full membership (Wenger, 1998) before beginning to offer insights to other users because they can contribute incomplete knowledge, which others can then expand upon, in relation to topics where their knowledge is burgeoning. This indicates a degree of levelling of the CoP’s hierarchy in that

peripheral members have just as much right to contribute to discussions as those who occupy more prestigious positions. They therefore engage in legitimate peripheral participation, LPP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), being corrected and re-educated as they go, in turn enabling them to accumulate more knowledge and traverse further through the community hierarchy (Davies, 2005).

As an example of such collaboration in action, and as an example of the co-construction of meaning for the CoP's terminology, the following series of posts were given in response to a thread in which a new user already identified as asexual, because they did not wish to have sex, but expressed confusion at experiencing arousal. Their post therefore sought clarification of their experiences and validation of their asexual identity. User 6B replied directly to the OP and User 6C then engaged them in a short exchange to clarify the terminology that User 6B proposed. Such exchanges are fairly common within the AVEN forums, with users often giving context to terms that are used and offering advice about which terms are best to use and which should be avoided.

Post 6.2

User 6B – 07/11/2020, 12.53AM

It's totally possible to get excited or aroused by sexual things without wanting sex for yourself. People with this experience may identify as autocorissexual[15] (pretty sure I spelled that right). You're of course not obligated to use that label though.

Hope this helps

Post 6.3

[15] Alternatively spelt 'autochorissexual'.

User 6C – 07/11/2020, 8.53AM

[Quoted post 6.2]

Well I read somewhere that it's preffered to call it aegosexuality, because autocorissexuality is a term from psychology for some kind of mental illness (?), I'm not sure. I think it's just better call it aegosexuality. Plus it's much easier to spell 😅

Post 6.4

User 6B – 08/11/2020, 5.16AM

[Quoted Post 6.3]

I've never heard that about the term autocorissexual, but that's interesting. I agree, aegosexual is much easier to spell, and pronounce lol.

In Post 6.2, User 6B uses the adverbial phrase 'totally possible' to reassure the OP that their experiences are valid, thereby authenticating the OP's claim to the asexual label. They then elaborate upon this assertion by providing a more specific label, 'autocorissexual', which they identify as a choice for others who have the same experiences. Although User 6B implies that this is also a possibility for the OP by extension, their use of the modal verb 'may' and the negated verb 'obligated' clearly indicate that the OP is not required to choose this label for themselves. User 6B therefore adheres to AVEN's policy not to prescribe labels to others. By providing this information, they adopt a temporary stance as an educator (in accordance with Bucholtz and Hall's positionality principle), positioning themselves as being knowledgeable about the subject and therefore in a position to educate the OP, thereby claiming a hierarchically superior persona. However, they also express some uncertainty about their spelling of the term, as indicated by their inclusion of the hedging adverb 'pretty' which suggests that they cannot be entirely sure that their spelling is correct, something which could indicate an attempt to hedge and self-efface. This and their use of the phrase 'Hope this helps', which is made more informal by the omitted pronoun 'I', could therefore indicate an attempt to be friendly and to downplay a perceived hierarchy between themself as the educator and the OP as the student.

User 6C then responds to User 6B to offer their own insights into use of the term 'autocorissexual'. They take on the role of correcting User 6B, providing the synonymous term 'aegosexual' and adopting a stance of preference towards it via the use of the

comparative adjective ‘better’ which in turn agrees with the views of others, as referenced in the verb phrase ‘it’s [preferred]’. Despite this preference for ‘aegosexual’, User 6C also expresses a degree of uncertainty towards their stance. This is apparent in their use of the negated verb ‘sure’ in the phrase ‘I’m not sure’, the inclusion of the bracketed question mark which queries the truth of their explanation (itself attributed to a vague source using the adverb ‘somewhere’), and the verb phrase ‘I think’ which frames their stance as subjective. These expressions of uncertainty again act as hedging techniques which soften the force of User 6C’s disagreement with User 6B’s stance and therefore suggests that this user strives for politeness and wishes to avoid confrontation.

In their response in Post 6.4, User 6B admits to being unfamiliar with User 6C’s explanation via the use of the negated verb phrase ‘never heard’. This may be seen to threaten their own positive face needs (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955) to be approved of and considered competent as it marks a comedown from the educator role that they adopted in Post 6.2 and an adoption of a hierarchically inferior role of student, in turn potentially inauthenticating their original claim to an educator stance. This mirrors an observation from Bucholtz’ (1999) study of nerd girls in which she found that intelligence represented a form of symbolic capital within the CoP and that inaccuracy and lack of knowledge about a subject could result in a loss of face for group members. Whilst the AVEN CoP does not place such value upon intelligence, its purpose and structural hierarchy do imbue the dissemination of knowledge with value and thus User 6C’s loss of educational legitimacy results in a comparative loss of status. However, User 6B initiates a repair of their positive face via expressing interest in the new information, referring to it anaphorically with the pronoun ‘that’ and using the coordinating conjunction ‘but’ to signify that their ignorance can be overcome, implying a willingness to learn and to consider this detail going forwards. Not only does this suggest that they take the challenge to their stance in good faith and do not perceive it as a threat to their position within the community, it also indicates familiarity with AVEN’s goals of education and awareness raising, with User 6B invoking them to improve their own understanding of the topic under discussion.

Their willingness to do so may also be influenced by a joke that the two users share in Posts 6.3 and 6.4. User 6C ends their post with an additional point that aegosexual is ‘much easier to spell’ in which the comparative adjective ‘easier’ again positions aegosexual as

preferential. This statement is accompanied by an amused emoticon which helps to frame this explanation as more trivial than their previous one about mental illness and thus, when presented alongside it, serves to offer some light relief which in turn signifies their intention to be friendly rather than confrontational. User 6B then picks up this joke in Post 6.4, agreeing with and then expanding upon it, as shown via the addition of the phrase ‘and pronounce’ which is also accompanied by an expression of humour, this time the informal slang term ‘lol’. This collaborative building of a joke between these two users ‘serves to create and maintain solidarity’ (Holmes, 2000: 159) and is symbolic of the two users recognising that their exchange has been informative rather than confrontational and that it has also been good natured. However, whilst an avoidance of confrontation is perhaps the desired approach to engagements on AVEN, this is not always easy for users to achieve and so cannot be considered a shared AVEN practice, as shall be shown in the discussion of Posts 6.12 – 6.19.

It is worth noting that both users 6B and 6C were relatively new to the forums and had small post counts suggesting infrequent contributions. This may explain some of the uncertainty expressed by each user towards their own stances, indicating that neither would consider themselves to be experts on the topic of this particular sexual identity. And yet, the two users were able to draw upon their differing knowledge to contribute to answering the query posed by the OP, thus demonstrating the benefits of a communal memory (Wenger, 1998) within the AVEN CoP. Through a collaborative exchange of ideas, then, User 6B engaged in LPP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), learning about the terminology in the course of their engagement with the thread, with User 6C furthering User 6B’s knowledge in a constructive and friendly manner. This in turn bolstered User 6B’s membership, supporting them as a peripheral member to potentially progress through the community on an inbound trajectory towards full membership.

Whilst the discussion between Users 6B and 6C shows two peripheral members of roughly equal status engaging in LPP to further their knowledge and status within the CoP, another pertinent example of LPP is found in the following posts from a discussion about LGBTQ+ acronyms. These posts demonstrate an example of top-down education with User 6D being corrected by two moderators for terminology which the AVEN organisation deems offensive and therefore inappropriate for use.

Post 6.5

User 6D – *08/12/2020, 4.38PM*

[…] So, hermaphrodite? That's what we grew up knowing. Remember, I'm the person married to an asexual partner who didn't have a word for it or knowledge it was a thing across 15 years of our relationship. Many of these differences are neither seen nor understood, especially among those a bit older perhaps.

Post 6.6

User 6E – *08/12/2020, 6.19PM (moderator – unofficial)*

[Quoted Post 6.5]

That word is on our list of words not to use [link to the list]

Post 6.7

User 6F – *08/12/2020, 7.42PM (moderator – unofficial)*

[Quoted Post 6.5]

Like [User E] said, please refrain from using that word--it's prohibited from being used on this forum. [...]

Post 6.8

User 6D – *08/12/2020, 9.01PM*

[Quoted Post 6.6]

Yikes! Sorry, I didn't know. I'll check out that list for future reference. Thanks

EDIT: I just checked out the list. That word is up there with some powerfully vulgar and unacceptable terms. My apologies. I'll leave it at that lest I out myself as even more uneducated. 🙄🤦‍♀️

Looking at Post 6.5, the term 'intersex' had come up earlier in the thread and, keen to understand it, User 6D had researched it and recognised the description as corresponding to a term they were already aware of, 'hermaphrodite'. Their use of the interrogative, 'So, hermaphrodite?', in which the absence of a comparative term such as 'like' could suggest that User 6D privileges 'hermaphrodite' over 'intersex', expresses uncertainty about their

interpretation before they justify their lack of familiarity with the term 'intersex' via indirect references to their age. These include the phrase 'what we grew up knowing', which implies that these details could be outdated and in which the inclusive subjective pronoun 'we' appears to reference people of their generation; the 15-year duration of their relationship, which suggests that they are older than the typical forum user (see Section 4.2 for more details); and the phrase 'those a bit older' which, although not overtly inclusive of User 6D, may be interpreted as such due to its inclusion in their post. User 6D's desire to justify their ignorance of 'intersex' in relation to age and time indicates their awareness of the importance of this term to the community and, perhaps, a sense of feeling out of touch with other AVEN members. This thereby symbolises their peripheral membership (Wenger, 1998).

In response, two moderators, acting in an unofficial capacity, drew attention to User 6D's word choice in relation to the forum's rules. User 6E did so by simply stating that the word is on AVEN's list of words not to use, providing a link to the list for easy reference. It is worth noting that the words on this list are generally slurs and extreme swear words. These are not referred to as 'banned' terms, because AVEN recognises that there are contexts in which the words can be used appropriately (for example, 'faggot' in its sense as a food but not its use as a slur), but users are reminded that the Terms of Service forbids slurs and hate speech and that admods may act if they see inappropriate uses of these words on the forums. User 6E's declarative rather than imperative post contained no other information or directions and so we may infer that they believed that reading the list would be all the direction that User 6D would need to realise their error and not use the word in future. Their status as a moderator, and their consequential elevated position on the forum hierarchy may therefore be seen to imbue their comment with a sense of obligation, encouraging compliance.

User 6F then clarifies this request via stating it explicitly in the phrase 'please refrain from using that term' but, interestingly, also attributes it to User 6E via the conjunctional phrase 'Like [User 6E] said', despite User 6E only implying this. By making this connection between User 6E's words and their own, then, User 6F not only aligns themself with and reinforces User 6E's inferred meaning but also clarifies the admod stance, perhaps believing that User 6E's post was not explicit enough. This creates cohesion between Posts 6.6 and 6.7 and removes any ambiguity.

User 6F also utilises non-confrontational language, such as the adverb ‘please’ to denote politeness and the verb phrase ‘refrain from using’ which, despite the high register verb ‘refrain’ symbolising their higher authority, is a less direct imperative than an alternative such as ‘do not use’. These features correspond to what Holmes (2000: 165) terms ‘repressive discourse’, where coercive intent is disguised in order to downplay power imbalances, encouraging ‘willing compliance’. Thus, softening the reprimand allows User 6D to feel in control of their actions despite the fact that this exchange seeks to remove a word from their vocabulary. This empowers them to make their own decision about how to proceed and protects their positive face needs. This is particularly important because the reprimand may be interpreted as denaturalisation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) as it highlights User 6D’s behaviour as not being in keeping with AVEN’s rules and thereby suggests that User 6D is unfamiliar with those rules.

The stance taken by the moderators in relation to discouraging use of ‘hermaphrodite’ is also interesting because of its wider implications for identity within AVEN. Whilst prohibiting use of the term is intended to protect intersex people from offensive terminology, this act also imposes restrictions upon identity in two notable ways. Firstly, in as much as it prevents individuals from using the term to reference others (whether ignorantly or maliciously), it also inevitably prevents individuals from positively identifying with the term to describe themselves, should they so wish, and this therefore restricts the acceptable identities that individuals can adopt within the AVEN context. More directly relevant to the present example, however, is the fact that in preventing User 6D from using a term which they associate with their generational upbringing, this act also illegitimates (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) User 6D’s generational identity by framing their language use as outdated and subject to disapproval and correction. In this respect, the moderators make it clear that modern linguistic choices are privileged on AVEN and that older forum members must adapt their existing knowledge towards these newer practices or risk sanctions, in turn indicating that it is the higher ranking forum members who have the power to determine what constitutes appropriate language use and to police it accordingly. Thus, although the prohibition of outdated terminology is designed to be inclusive of those who may be offended by such terms, there is also the potential here for older forum members to feel excluded on the grounds that their pre-existing knowledge is invalidated. This could be viewed by some such

users as particularly alienating when older members are already in the minority within these forums (see Section 4.2).

In their response to these messages in Post 6.8, however, User 6D demonstrated openness towards the correction. They used the exclamative ‘Yikes!’ to indicate alarm, suggesting that they were troubled by this revelation, but also surprise at their mistake, which suggests that they were unaware of the issue previously. This may be seen to preserve their positive face by positioning themself as being innocent of malicious intent and yet, the double apology ‘Sorry’ and ‘My apologies’ culminate in a loss of face as User 6D accepts their mistake. This is supported by their acknowledgement that the list is made up of words described using the adjectival phrase ‘powerfully vulgar and unacceptable’ as this is not questioned and therefore serves as acceptance of hermaphrodite’s place amongst these other words. The phrase ‘I didn’t know’ is also notable, serving a dual purpose of an admission of ignorance, resulting in a loss of face, but also as a defence which preserves their positive face needs by indirectly reminding other users of their peripheral membership and thereby tempering expectations of User 6D’s knowledge of the CoP’s practices.

User 6D also acknowledges User 6E’s hierarchical superiority, deferring to their greater experience and authority by offering thanks for the correction, suggesting that User 6D interpreted it as well-meaning and an attempt to further their knowledge rather than challenge their position within the CoP. Through thanking User 6E in this way, then, User 6D demonstrates humility and positions themself as a novice, peripheral AVEN user who still has much to learn about AVEN’s practices. This in turn suggests that they recognise that learning is an important practice within the AVEN CoP and is viewed as a route to bettering oneself.

User 6D expresses their willingness to learn via the declarative sentence ‘I’ll check out that list for future reference’. By using the pronoun ‘that’ to refer anaphorically to the list mentioned in Post 6.6, User 6D signals their intention to not only learn more about the issue but also to learn directly from the shared resource of the list and to thereby engage with the forum’s rules and practices. In doing so, they acknowledge the importance of these rules to the community’s identity and position themself as wanting to comply with them and to consequently further their community membership going forwards, as signified by the use of the prepositional phrase ‘for future reference’. This willingness to adapt their practices to

AVEN's rules ultimately resulted in User 6D maintaining their peripheral membership and avoiding rejection from the community.

User 6D then ended their post with the self-effacing humorous comment 'I'll leave it at that lest I out myself as even more uneducated'. The dry tone of this construction, as suggested by the eye-rolling and face-palming emojis which follow it, and the emphasis of the adverbial phrase 'even more' in relation to the adjective 'uneducated', suggests awareness of and resignation to their fallibility. That this face-threatening comment closes their post leaves the lasting impression that User 6D was embarrassed by their error, yet turning it into a source of humour marks an attempt at eliciting empathy from and building solidarity with the other users (the fact that three users 'liked' User 6D's post could be interpreted as a sign of success). This mirrors an example found in Holmes' research in professional settings where humour functions as a 'speaker-oriented positively polite device, oriented to the participants' need to be valued' (2000: 170).

This subsection has shown that validation and support exist in multiple forms on AVEN, with members not only coming together to receive and offer emotional support for coming to understand and accept asexual identities and relationships but also to further each other's understanding of asexuality and related concepts. This in turn legitimises their participation as AVEN members or encourages further engagement with the rules as a route to becoming more valued and inclusive members of the community. The following subsection will look at how engagement with the forum's debate culture enables members to construct a shared sense of what it means to be asexual in the AVEN context.

6.1.2 Debate culture

Whilst AVEN offers its users a key site for discussing and sharing their experiences for supportive and social purposes, it also has a well-established debate culture, through which individuals can discuss current understandings of asexuality, address issues which they find problematic and assess new and existing theories, models and terminology for their value to the asexual cause, in turn informing the collective and individual identities that are constructed. The practice of debating these topics is therefore an important feature of the forums for members of the AVEN community who are interested in activism, asexual

awareness and shaping AVEN's future. Many of these users actively seek out opportunities to discuss asexual topics and to engage critically with one another's views on such matters. In terms of the CoP, this is one area of AVEN community life which acts as 'the table at which 'what is right' is continually negotiated' (Eckert and Wenger, 2005: 583). By this I mean that AVEN's debate culture allows individuals to take part in determining how asexuality is delineated and understood and that this in turn gives users some agency in how the community presents itself and asexuality to the wider world. Thus, the collective identity of the CoP is constructed in response to the needs and desires of its members.

A clear example of how debate within AVEN can enable exploration of asexual concepts is found in Posts 6.9 to 6.11. These were given in response to a thread asking for clarity on what sexual attraction is and how this relates to the OP's sexual experiences. In their first post to this thread (not analysed here), User 6H detailed their own understandings of attraction and suggested ways that it could apply to the OP's experiences. As part of this post, they included a meme (Figure 3) designed to illustrate one of their points. Several other users responded with opinions of the meme's inaccuracy – this is the discussion that User 6G engaged in with User 6H. In each case, the post began with a quote of the preceding post to make it clear to other users which particular posts were being discussed.

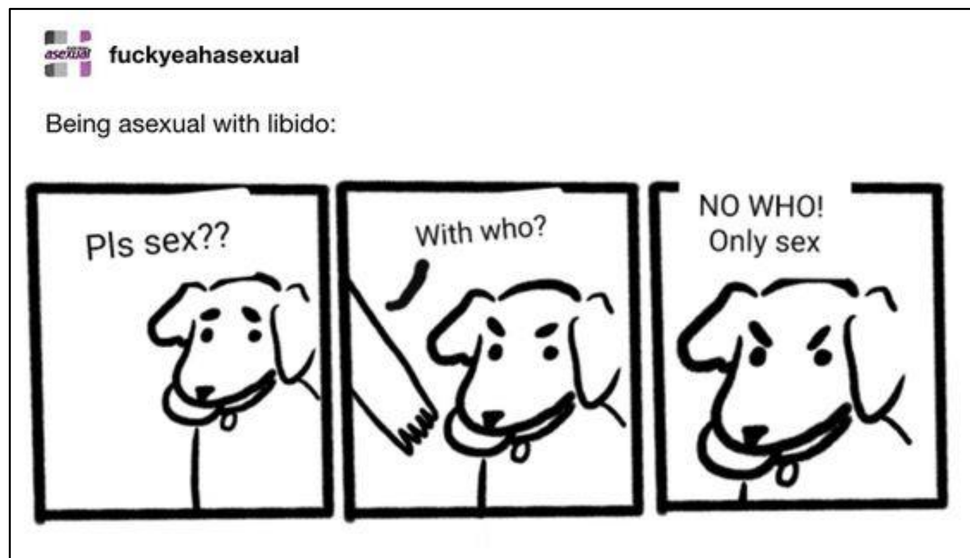

Figure 3 – A meme reproduced by User 6H from an external website

Post 6.9

User 6G – 12/11/2020, 9.33PM

[Paraphrase: [Quoted meme post] As someone who identifies as asexual and has a libido, I strongly disagree with this meme. I would not use it to describe my asexuality because it makes it sound like we want to have sexual contact with someone without recognising them as a person. 'Sexual release' would be a better word than just 'sex'.][16]

Post 6.10

User 6H – 12/11/2020, 9.39PM

[Quoted Post 6.9] That's fair. These things are pretty subjective. My interpretation of it wasn't so much not seeing a sexual partner as a person, but rather not wanting a sexual partner at all. More like... the abstract idea of sex is nice but there is very rarely any person I would be particularly inclined to choose to make that a reality, and I would rather stick to the fantasies in my own head. Does that make sense?

Post 6.11

User 6G – 12/11/2020, 9.53PM

[Paraphrase: [Quoted Post 6.10] Yes, that's more clear. Using 'other person' instead of 'with who' could also work. I would interpret that as rejecting partnered sexual acts rather than lacking desire for another specific person.]

Although it is not possible to analyse the linguistic features of Post 6.9, User 6G took an explicit stance of disagreement towards the meme and made a claim for legitimacy (Wenger, 1998) by providing context about their sexual identity (the identity supposedly represented by the meme). That this was also foregrounded at the start of their post shows that they believed this factor to have a significant bearing upon their legitimacy to hold this view. As a result of this stance, they also stated that they would not use the meme to reference their own sexuality because they felt that the meme dehumanises sexual partners. They then offered a potential remedy to the meme which they believed would make it more accurate to their own understanding of attraction. Whilst User 6G's critique of the meme was clear, then, they also

[16] User 6G declined permission for their posts to be replicated in full but agreed to the use of paraphrased summaries to give context to other posts within this thread.

acknowledged that this view may not be shared by others, highlighting their own subjectivity and thereby showing awareness of the array of identities which occupy the AVEN CoP.

User 6H responded to this post, firstly by legitimising User 6G's stance with the phrase 'That's fair' and then by recognising not just User 6G's subjectivity but also everyone else's with the deterministic noun phrase 'these things' suggesting a generalised application of the subjectivity. Having recognised User 6G's legitimacy, User 6H then expresses their own interpretation of the meme, justifying their reasons for originally including it in their post. The phrase 'wasn't so much' serves to distance their interpretation from what User 6G believes they meant, whilst the pairing of the coordinating conjunction 'but' and the adverb 'rather' positions their own interpretation as different yet equal to User 6G's, in turn demonstrating their own acceptance of different views and also signifying that the presence of these differences, and disagreements which arise from them, are commonplace and accepted by the AVEN CoP as a CoP norm (see, for example, Marra, 2012). They then explain their rationale further and end their post with the simple interrogative sentence 'Does that make sense?' which not only expresses a degree of uncertainty, potentially threatening their own positive face needs, but also explicitly invites User 6G to engage with and assess their points further. In this way, User 6H pre-empts a possible challenge by User 6G and, in so doing, minimises any upcoming threat to their own positive face needs by presenting themself as open to criticisms.

User 6G then took up User 6H's invitation in Post 6.11 and authenticated User 6H's interpretation via indicating that their explanation seemed satisfactory. They also again offered a remedy for the meme, this time one which they believed would more adequately communicate the meaning which User 6H ascribed to it. In balancing an acknowledgement that User 6H's interpretation is legitimate with maintaining their own argument that the meme could be improved, User 6G attended to both their own and User 6H's positive face needs (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955), avoiding the invalidation of either point of view and so maintaining a polite and respectful atmosphere within the discussion which allowed difference of opinion to be a source of education rather than conflict.

These posts therefore demonstrate two users coming together to discuss their differing ideas on a resource (the meme) and, through their exchange of ideas, improving the meme and

better understanding one another's stance on the issue. They do this via explaining their own views and offering reinterpretations of the meme which would better cover their understandings. They also legitimise the other's views and use informal vocabulary items to indicate a friendly response to the differences identified. This careful and respectful negotiation of ideas shows that difference of opinion can be both accommodated and embraced within the AVEN CoP, suggesting that the community's heterogeneous views are fundamental to its development, with individual users working together to come to an understanding which avoids illegitimising the views of others and builds upon existing resources to further understandings of asexuality and create more accurate communications of concepts. In this sense, AVEN provides a forum which legitimises (Wenger, 1998; Davies, 2005) user involvement in challenging asexual concepts and ideas and therefore allows these users to not only build their own asexual identities but also to participate in the ongoing construction of asexuality itself. As a result, we see that the AVEN CoP acts as a locus for fine-tuning understandings of asexuality and that user involvement is therefore central to achieving the CoP's aims.

Whilst the analysis of these posts shows that debating can work smoothly and has undeniable benefits for the community's development and the progression of awareness raising, the debate culture is not without its detractors. One issue that was frequently raised by my survey respondents was that debates can often become heated and hostile, as evidenced in the following survey responses:

(6.7) […] debates can get quite vicious to the point where they don't make me feel very welcome.

(6.8) Actual ace spec[17] related content on AVEN is very toxic in my experience and I can't savely navigate it so I currently avoid that as much as I can.

(6.9) AVEN, or some of the louder members, don't like to hear more conservative opinions. […] If you're not liberal in the correct ways or if you do not agree with certain concepts (even politely) AVEN can feel unwelcoming […] You can expect to be ridiculed and slandered because your views are "ridiculous" and "hateful" when you're not advocating any hate whatsoever.

[17] 'Ace spec' is a shortened form of 'asexual spectrum' and is used to denote all of the identities which are subsumed under the general asexual umbrella.

(6.10) When I first started out, I was really involved with the discussions about asexuality because I wanted to learn as much as I could about asexuality. But, over time, I have increasingly become disenchanted with AVEN and now my interactions with it are few and far between and anything that I say on the forums don't have anything to do with asexuality anymore.

The use of the adjectives ‘vicious’ in (6.7) and ‘toxic’ in (6.8) characterise the debates as potentially harmful to the wellbeing of AVEN members whilst the verbs ‘ridiculed’ and ‘slandered’ in (6.9) indicate that some users find their views to be judged and attacked by others. In contrast to the views expressed in section 6.1.1, these responses show that not all members of AVEN find the forums to be supportive or free of judgement. In (6.7) and (6.9), these circumstances lead the respondents to feel unwelcome on the forums, whilst (6.8) uses the negated adverb ‘savely [safely]’ to indicate that the toxic conditions create a potentially hazardous environment which becomes difficult to navigate. Many individuals therefore actively avoid situations which lead them to feel unwelcome and, yet, Response (6.8)’s use of the phrase ‘as much as I can’ suggests that this is not always possible which in turn implies that these difficult situations are commonplace across the forums.

That discussions on the forums often become heated is testament to the passions that users experience when engaging with discussions of asexuality. However, whilst impassioned discussions enable the community to maintain the integrity of its debate culture, this has been shown to create an atmosphere which deters some users who might otherwise be interested in joining in. This is especially pertinent given how important debating is as an AVEN practice and means that individuals who avoid these debates prevent themselves from gaining or maintaining full membership (Wenger, 1998) of the community. This indicates a degree of marginalisation (Wenger, 1998) within the culture of the AVEN forums which challenges the CoP’s aims of being fully tolerant and inclusive and, thus, it seems that such marginalisation of members represents a non-CoP practice.

There are parallels here with an observation in Thomas’ (2005) research into a Lord of the Rings fan forum in which she observed one user being marginalised by other users who found her contributions frustrating (on account of them not meeting the CoP’s standards for literate behaviour) and sought to have her posts removed from the forums and her

participation restricted. Although this user did not distance herself from content for the sake of self-protection, the attitudes and behaviours of other users contributed to her being monitored and side-lined until she learned how to adhere to the CoP's expectations for engagement. This demonstrates that CoP members may impede the participation of others and hinder them from contributing to the CoP's culture and practices until they can conform to expectations. This is, in turn, symbolic of a hierarchy within the Lord of the Rings forums in which more experienced users have the power to indirectly restrict the behaviour of newer members (via appealing to the admods to take action) and this mirrors the hierarchical structure of the AVEN CoP, as shown in the discussion of Posts 6.5 – 6.8 above.

On this theme, whilst moderation can alleviate some issues of marginalisation, some respondents indicated that their involvement in debates has been impeded by feelings that the AVEN organisation's policies, the moderators and other users play too great a role in curtailing, monitoring and reprimanding their contributions. For example, Response (6.9) speaks to the idea of being restricted in the contributions they can make by 'AVEN, or some of the louder members'. That they associate the actions of the louder members with AVEN as a whole is perhaps indicative of these louder members being particularly prominent and seeming to be representative of AVEN's attitudes more widely, implying that this respondent finds these acts oppressive. They then recount situations in which users may find their views side-lined or criticised, with the generic pronoun 'you' again showing that, rather than speaking purely of their own experiences, they are instead speaking for the community as a whole. By drawing attention to situations in which the sanctioned user was 'not advocating any hate whatsoever', they suggest that there is a distinction between those who do and do not advocate hate when expressing their opinions and we might infer that this represents a boundary between practices on which sanctioning is and is not deemed appropriate by this user. Their perception that sanctioning is sometimes misplaced therefore speaks to a degree of tension between what different users believe classifies as problematic content.

This is likely one reason that the AVEN organisation mandates agreement with its Terms of Service during registration for the forums as this establishes rules of engagement from the outset which sets a precedent for user behaviour. In this sense, AVEN sets ground rules for what it means to be an AVEN member – including expectations of tolerance and inclusivity – and users must learn to adapt to these expectations or otherwise risk being sanctioned or

excluded from the forums. The systematic enforcement of this practice by moderators, who are the only users who have the power to enact official sanctions, and the rigid hierarchies that this necessarily entails, is unusual in traditional CoPs but is more common in online CoPs. For example, Stommel's (2008) research on an eating disorder forum found evidence of moderators rigorously enforcing forum rules by removing lines from new users' posts to make them compliant. This practice, and questions of the users' intentions for using the forums, sometimes resulted in these users being deterred from participating further. Whilst moderation in the AVEN context is rarely as direct as in Stommel's case, there are parallels between the two CoP's with the enforcement of rules being shown to marginalise those members who are unable or unwilling to adapt to these expectations (Wenger, 1998) and this again raises questions about just how inclusive such CoPs can claim to be.

Response (6.10) also indicates the respondent's dissatisfaction with AVEN's debate culture, having previously been 'really involved' with this aspect of AVEN practices. The use of the adverb 'really' here contrasts markedly with their subsequent admission that their interactions are now minimal, as indicated by the adjectival phrase 'few and far between'. This speaks to a change in the manner of their engagement and is further emphasised by the prepositional phrase 'over time' and the adverbs 'now' and 'increasingly' which give the impression that their changed views have built up and today deter them from participating in discussions of asexuality. Whilst this user does not state explicitly the reasons for their dissatisfaction, they do describe themself using the adjective 'disenchanted' which suggests a sense of disappointment with what AVEN offers, implying that the forums do not live up to their expectations.

That this individual has adapted to their disenchantment by avoiding the discussions of asexuality which originally drew them to the forums is important because this leaves them only feeling motivated to engage with discussions removed from asexuality. As noted previously, debating and discussing asexuality are seen as key practices in the AVEN community and so this respondent's reluctance to engage with these sites of interaction necessarily marginalises them, preventing them from being able to contribute to the inner workings of the forums or to influence the direction that the forums take going forwards (Wenger, 1998). Although seemingly self-imposed, this marginalisation suggests that they could be on an outbound trajectory, or are otherwise not seeking to traverse an inbound

trajectory, and that AVEN's debate culture has, in some unspecified way, contributed to their lack of participation in key AVEN practices. This parallels Moore's (2006 and 2009) findings regarding her Popular and Townie CoPs.

To illustrate the hostilities that sometimes emerge within the forums, Posts 6.12 – 6.19 are taken from a debate about issues associated with including asexual spectrum identities within the asexual label. The OP, User 6I, began the thread to ask whether a term existed, or needed to be coined, to refer to people who do not experience any kind of sexual attraction or desire. This related to User 6I's belief that the term 'asexual' had been widely co-opted to mean 'asexual spectrum', thereby leaving 'asexual asexuals'[18] without a label specific to their own identity. The following extracts from the thread have been selected to show how users attempt to navigate interpersonal tensions and respond to hostile comments within the forums.

> Post 6.12
> User 6I – *20/01/2021, 4.02PM*
> [Quoted a previous post by User 6J in which they agreed that it was important for asexual people to have distinct labels but argued that asexual spectrum people fight for the same issues and so should be recognised as similar]
> […] why would it ever matter to someone with five increasingly specific labels, when the asexual asexuals like me just have the one extremely unspecific one. You don't care because you're included as asexual without having to compromise any other part of your identity, and that's just not the case for everyone.

[18] Other users, in this thread and beyond, referred to such people as 'true', 'pure' or 'strict' asexuals, however these terms were not the OP's preference. The terms refer to those who do not experience any degree of sexual attraction, in contrast to those on the asexual spectrum who may occasionally experience attraction under particular circumstances. There is similarity here with Jones' (2014) findings that the masculine 'dyke' was deemed a more authentic lesbian identity than the alternative 'femme' in a lesbian walking group.

Post 6.13

User 6I – *20/01/2021, 4.10PM*

[Quoted a previous post by User 6K in which they felt that User 6K made a redundant point]

[…] I don't think this is the thread for you.

Post 6.14

User 6J – *20/01/2021, 4.12PM*

[Quoted Post 6.12]

You're being unfait and you're the one who doesn't care. That's not what I said at all, and you didn't even mention my actual point, so me thinks youre just here to be disruptive. and don't really care about the cause.

Why the fuck do you think someone in the gray area doesn't compromise? you're starting to piss me off.

Post 6.15

User 6K – *20/01/2021, 4.17PM*

[Paraphrase: [Quoted Post 6.13] […] You can't get rid of me so easily.][19]

Post 6.16

User 6L – *20/01/2021, 4.18PM*

Hey guys... let's try to keep this civil. We can disagree, but let's try and not get to aggressive and heated. There is always a middleground solution to the problem so let's take a deep breath and everyone summarize there points in a clear and concise bullet points then we can move from there. Sound good to everyone?

Post 6.17

User 6I – *20/01/2021, 4.21PM*

As far as I can tell, [User 6K] is being as dense and off-topic as possible, on purpose, so that they can start shitposting, and [User 6J] is trying [their] best but ultimately has no real solution for me.

---

[19] User 6K declined permission for their posts to be replicated in full but agreed to the use of a paraphrased summaries to give context to other posts within this thread.

Post 6.18

User 6K – *20/01/2021, 4.25PM*

[Paraphrase: [Quoted Post 6.17] *Sarcastic emoji*
Seriously, I don't understand what you're trying to say and you're not helping me to understand because you're not providing any useful feedback.]

Post 6.19

User 6M – *20/01/2021, 6.02PM (moderator – official)*

Ok I'm gonna lock this thread for cool down and possible review. [signed off with username and moderator credentials]

In Posts 6.12 and 6.13, User 6I negatively assesses previous contributions from Users 6J and 6K as missing the point of the thread and as being off topic, respectively. Of particular relevance, here, however, are the latter parts of each of User 6I's posts where they illegitimise (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) the other users' contributions. In the early part of Post 6.12, User 6I interprets User 6J's previous post as dismissing the need for a specific label for those who experience no sexual attraction at all and they express frustration that this view missed the point of the thread. In the extract above, they then reference User 6J indirectly using the pronominal phrase 'someone with five increasingly specific labels', which draws intertextually upon the profile information which accompanied User 6J's posts. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the practice of layering sexual and romantic identity labels is common amongst asexual people, particularly those on the asexual spectrum for whom individual labels may not be wholly representative of their identities. This multitude of labels therefore highlights User 6J as someone on the asexual spectrum, in contrast to User 6I themself, and others like them, who are referred to as 'asexual asexuals'. This clear use of the ToI of distinction enables User 6I to denounce User 6J's legitimacy to decide what counts as asexual on the grounds that they are perceived as an outgroup member and therefore a part of the group which is causing the issue identified by User 6I in their first post, namely that asexual spectrum people have co-opted the asexual label. In this sense, User 6I positions 'asexual asexuals' as having hierarchical superiority in deciding the meaning of 'asexual'.

User 6I responds similarly to User 6K in Post 6.13 when, having countered User 6K's stance on an issue, they conclude their post with the declarative sentence 'I don't think this is the thread for you'. This construction avoids the confrontation of an imperative that directs User 6K away from the thread but it nevertheless suggests an attempt to control or influence the content of the thread. User 6I takes ownership of their belief via the inclusion of the first person subjective pronoun 'I', thus signifying an adoption of an authoritative stance. This is particularly noteworthy when compared to other examples of authority discussed in this chapter as User 6I had joined the forums more recently than either User 6J or 6K and had a far smaller post count. We might therefore anticipate that User 6I would defer to the other more experienced users and so their confrontation with both in this thread is not a typical observance of the CoP's hierarchy. User 6I's perception of their own authority might therefore be highly context specific, as the OP of the thread who, unlike Users 6J and 6K, was the authority on User 6I's intentions. In this sense, User 6I does not position themself as being an authority on the community and its content but rather as an authority on their own thread and what it seeks to achieve. It is also possible that they view their peripheral status as equipping them with a fresh and novel perspective which has the potential to innovate the community's understandings and perspectives (see, for example, Safadi *et al*., 2020), thereby aligning them with the CoP's aims for engagement and allowing them to self-validate their claim to authority.

However, Post 6.14 indicates that User 6J does not view User 6I's behaviour as being in keeping with AVEN's practices. In the first sentence, they rebut User 6I's criticisms, utilising two declarative constructions, both beginning with the pronominal phrase 'you're' and connected by the coordinating conjunction 'and', to give equal weight to their accusations and to stress that they believe it is User 6I and not themself who is at fault. They then back up this stance, outlining what they perceive as the issues with User 6I's arguments, using the adverbs 'at all' and 'even' to intensify their criticisms and to diminish the validity of User 6I's accusations by highlighting them as inaccurate. These features signify an emotive display of User 6J's anger at User 6I's accusations and so it is notable that they also use the phrase 'me thinks', which is often used humorously. This could indicate an attempt to defuse the emotional tone of the post but there are perhaps also similarities with what Holmes (2000: 174) calls a 'covert strategy for face attack' – that is, using humour to disguise a patronising,

and therefore face threatening comment, thereby making it more agreeable to the atmosphere of the forums.

In using the adverb 'just' in relation to User 6I being disruptive, User 6J again diminishes the validity of User I's contributions by suggesting that User I's motives for the thread do not conform to the expected standards for AVEN engagements, being provocative rather than informative. This is then emphasised further with the clause 'and don't really care about the cause' which highlights User I's provocations as being directly at odds with the aims of tolerant education that the AVEN forums strive for, perhaps even insinuating that this behaviour is reminiscent of the banned practice of trolling[20], thereby illegitimising and denaturalising their participation and claim to AVEN membership. This corresponds to Graham's (2007) observation that not meeting community expectations means failing to construct an identity as a community member and results in interlocutors more commonly interpreting non-compliant behaviours, such as User 6I's, as deliberate attacks on other users' face needs and therefore as impoliteness. Thus we see that non-adherence to community expectations bears negatively upon perceptions of a user's behaviour.

User 6J then closes their post by questioning User 6I's belief that asexual spectrum people do not need to compromise. Whilst they do not offer an alternative perspective, the presence of the expletive in the interrogative construction 'Why the fuck…' indicates incredulity at User 6I's assessment which in turn implies that User 6J believes it to be incorrect. They then end their post with the declarative sentence 'you're starting to piss me off' in which the expletive this time emphasises their irritation and positions User 6I as being difficult and aggravating, again illegitimising them by suggesting that their behaviour is not conducive to a fair discussion. This threatens User 6I's positive face needs for belonging to the AVEN CoP.

Although it is not possible to analyse Post 6.15 by User 6K in full, it is worth noting that their post responded to User 6I's criticisms of them from Post 6.13. Of particular note is their final sentence which utilised a declarative construction to inform User 6I that their attempt to illegitimise and control User 6K's contributions in Post 6.13 was ineffective. They indicated an intention to remain contributing to the thread, suggesting that User 6I did not have the

[20] Trolling is the term used to describe 'online antagonism undertaken for amusement's sake' (Hardaker, 2013: 77) and is banned on the AVEN forums.

authority to control User 6K's behaviour. They also implied that User 6I was not as intimidating as they believed themsel to be and therefore again threatened User 6I's positive face needs. In these ways, User 6K indirectly asserted their right to continue contributing to the thread and challenged User 6I's authority in attempting to control the content.

By opening Post 6.16 with the phrase 'Hey guys', User 6L adopts a friendly and informal tone to avoid coming across as authoritarian. Their post has a strategic and reconciliatory purpose, attempting to reduce the tension in the thread via appealing to the other users to 'keep this civil'. Although the verb 'keep' suggests that the thread is already civil and that this should be maintained, the fact that this user feels the need to make this plea is an indication that they believe that the thread is becoming uncivilised. They therefore take a stance of disagreeing with the tone of the other users' posts and position themself as a peacekeeper. They develop this persona via the use of the third person inclusive pronouns 'we' and 'us', which refer collectively to all of the thread's users, in the affirmative phrase 'We can disagree', which validates and authorises the sharing of different views, and the verb phrase 'let's try' which denotes a belief that they all share a responsibility to avoid uncivil behaviours. These references include User 6L themself which suggests that they adequate themself with their fellow thread users and do not view themself as being above their own advice. Having provided a suggestion for how to proceed in a more civilised fashion, User 6L then closes their post with the interrogative 'Sound good to everyone?'. This is a leading question which privileges the view that this is a good suggestion, encouraging the other users to agree. Crucially, though, the inclusion of this question invites the other users to engage with their suggestion which creates a sense of egalitarianism through which User 6L again avoids positioning themself as authoritarian, another example of repressive discourse being used to reduce a potential power imbalance (Holmes, 2000). It is worth noting, however, that User 6L's suggestion is ignored by the other users in the thread, something which could result from their avoidance of an authoritarian stance or otherwise from their status as a standard user who has no authority over other AVEN members and who therefore does not command compliance.

Although User 6I, in Post 6.17, chose not to summarise their arguments as suggested by User 6L, they did summarise their feelings about Users 6J and 6K. They use the adjectives 'dense' and 'off-topic' to negatively evaluate User 6K's behaviour and, through their use of the

adverbial phrases ‘as… as possible’ and ‘on purpose’, they suggest that User 6K is being intentionally difficult. These characteristics are frequently associated with the behaviour of online trolls and whilst this connection is made implicitly, User 6I also makes it explicitly via the verb ‘shitposting[21]’ as User 6K’s perceived goal within the thread. As trolling is frowned upon by the AVEN community, User 6I’s accusation that User 6K is committing this kind of behaviour denaturalises (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) them as a valued AVEN member. User 6I offers a more positive assessment of User 6J’s behaviour via the verb phrase ‘trying [their] best’ and yet this could also be read as condescending, particularly in light of the subsequent subordinate clause in which User 6J’s contributions are illegitimised as being unhelpful in the phrase ‘has no real solution for me’. As such, User 6I again positions themself as having the authority to determine what counts as useful contributions and valuable behaviour for answering their questions and so positions Users 6J and 6K as falling short of these marks.

Although it is again not possible to analyse Post 6.18 in full, User 6K responded to Post 6.17 with an emoji which may be interpreted as interpersonally aggressive for being sarcastic or teasing (Norrick and Spitz, 2008), again implying a sense of playfulness and humour. Thus User 6K positioned themself as undermining the serious tone of User 6I’s criticisms in Post 6.17. In explaining their own confusion about the topic, User 6K then positioned User 6I as being unhelpful which minimised User 6I’s contributions. They suggested that User 6I does not help the other users to contribute answers which might be more relevant, positioning User 6I as being the cause of the issues which they identify, and they denaturalised User 6I as a member of AVEN by again highlighting their conduct as not facilitating insightful discussions. In this sense, User 6K suggested that User 6I does not adhere to the ethos of AVEN’s debate culture. The retaliatory nature of User 6K denaturalising User 6I after the same was done in reverse also suggests that User 6K was aware of the importance of validation and authenticity in the AVEN community and so not attending to User 6I’s face needs in this regard positioned them as having the power to withhold such acceptance.

Following some further discussion which included comparative references to arguments made by some lesbian groups that bisexual and transgender women threaten the existence of

[21] A slang term for a practice in online contexts of posting off-topic or offensive content with the intention of derailing conversations or provoking participants.

lesbians, User 6L expressed discomfort at the direction the thread was taking. Shortly after this, a moderator, User 6M, added Post 6.19 in the green font of official communications. This post is a clear demonstration of their authority with the declarative tone illustrative of the fact that they do not need to seek permission to lock another user's thread. It is worth noting that standard users are not able to lock or delete their own threads which prevents them from having full control over them. Thus, the admods' ability to lock threads represents an additional power that they alone can use to control forum content when required. Despite having this power, User 6M nevertheless explains their decision using the prepositional phrase 'for cool down and possible review', indicating a degree of accountability and transparency, and, although it is not possible to determine which aspects of the thread led them to take this step, the reference to the verb phrase 'cool down' shows that they were cognisant of the heated nature of the discussion and sought to prevent this from escalating. By locking the thread, then, User 6M takes on the role of controlling forum content by preventing users from adding to a topic which had already become problematic and, in so doing, they adopted a stance of protecting other users and preventing further harm[22]. Although this aspect of moderator power is used sparingly within the AVEN forums, with the admods generally trusting users to reign themselves in when prompted, this demonstration of the moderator's authority shows clearly that additional steps will be taken when needed to ensure that the forum content adheres to the AVEN organisation's standards and remain good natured and safe for their users.

The analyses in this section have shown that although an established debate culture within AVEN encourages users to engage with each other's ideas and perspectives, the ways in which some of these discussions evolve can create an atmosphere of intolerance which some users find off-putting. In particular, whilst impassioned debate about asexual topics is an accepted – even expected – activity in the AVEN CoP, personal attacks and intolerance of viewpoints is not and is challenged by admods and standard users alike. It is also clear, however, that AVEN's moderation policies, which are designed to protect users and to maintain a safe space for interactions, can also alienate users who feel that these policies limit the scope of their engagement and that this too can dissuade users from engaging in

[22] One of the users in this exchange also reported receiving an official warning from the moderators for breaching forum rules.

discussions. It is therefore worth exploring moderation in more detail in the following section.

6.2 Moderating community engagement

As discussed in Chapter 4, AVEN's democratically elected admod team are ever-present on the forums to enforce the Terms of Service (ToS), to monitor the conduct of AVEN members and to prevent situations from escalating out of hand. As has been shown in Section 6.1.2, however, this is not always a straightforward task, with subjective interpretations of AVEN's rules sometimes resulting in hostility and conflict. This section explores some examples of moderation which demonstrate how moderators balance their need to enforce the rules with respecting AVEN's membership.

Over the space of a few weeks, a new user had begun creating multiple new threads about the same general topic of their own confusion about their sexuality. The frequency of these new posts was uncommon for AVEN, where 48.7% of my survey respondents (55 individuals) reported never having started a new thread and just 0.9% of respondents (1 individual) stated that they started new threads as often as several times per week. The frequency of this OP's posting therefore immediately marked them out, highlighting their peripheral status as a new member of the forums who was inexperienced in typical forum practices. The user's opening posts were typically only a few lines long and asked other users for insights on their experiences. In keeping with the CoP's common practice of offering help and support, that was identified in Section 6.1.1, more experienced users would respond to the topics with information that they deemed relevant or links to other threads where similar issues had been discussed.

Although at first users had been happy to respond to these threads, they soon began to notice that the user was not taking heed of their information and advice and was continuing to ask much the same question in other new threads. At this stage, the responding users began to refer back to their previous comments and to express irritation with the OP's behaviour. The following posts are taken from one such thread in which several experienced AVEN members questioned the OP's motives.

In protest against the OP's repeated postings, some users who were familiar with AVEN's rules, as well with the kinds of behaviours which could potentially lead to them being admonished, utilised methods which enabled them to circumvent the rules. For example, as stated in clause 4.3 of its Terms of Service (ToS), the AVEN organisation disapproves of what it terms 'Vigilante Modding [moderating]' – that is, ordinary users 'harassing, attacking, or otherwise antagonizing members [who they] believe are acting inappropriately and/or [who they] believe have violated the ToS'. Members who feel they have encountered behaviours which go against the ToS are advised to instead report the behaviour to the admods who can then decide how to proceed and, in this sense, the admods are invested with the power to determine how issues with AVEN's members are approached. As already identified, problematic behaviours include trolling the forums and yet, in cases where a user's behaviour is reminiscent of trolling but not definitively so, other users may attempt to get around the rules by referencing trolling indirectly, such as in the following example made in reference to the OP's repeated posting:

> Post 6.20
> *User 6N– 03/02/2020, 7.56PM*
> It could also be a symptom of a common internet behaviour that we're not allowed to suggest someone is participating in. I'm honestly just lost.

The use of the indefinite article 'a' suggests that there are several such practices and does not pinpoint which is being referred to in this case. This has the effect of making the reference seem more vague, although the use of the noun phrase 'internet behaviour' has the opposite effect, pointing towards a more specific – although equally un-named – frame of reference. The use of the adjective 'common' suggests that other users are likely to have come across the behaviour previously, thus helping them to narrow down which behaviour is being referred to. Similarly, the phrase 'that we're not allowed to…' links User 6N's reference to the AVEN organisation's ToS (which are part of the CoP's shared repertoire and serve to authorise or illegitimise conduct on the forums) and, through presupposing that other users will be aware of what these are, the user is able to indirectly refer to the practice of trolling. In this sense, this user draws intertextually upon resources with which AVEN members will be familiar, thereby positioning themself as a veteran member who is knowledgeable about the rules, in order to indirectly communicate their meaning.

This indirectness allowed User 6N to avoid naming the practice of trolling whilst also achieving their aim of drawing attention to the behaviour which they found problematic. In this case, they were able to alert other users to their suspicion that the OP's threads were not genuine questions, in the hope that doing so would prevent other users from wasting time responding to the topic, whilst also not contravening the AVEN rules to the extent that it would see them reprimanded.

However, it was clear from the admod responses that although they recognised that forum rules had not yet been broken in posts such as 6.20, they were being flouted. For example, some users had begun to suggest medical conditions that could explain why the OP kept posting about the same topic, indirectly suggesting that the OP's behaviour deviated from that expected of someone in full health. One moderator, posting in the standard black typeface and so acting in an unofficial capacity, posted:

Post 6.21

User 6O – 03/02/2020, 8.09PM (moderator – unofficial)

Can we stop speculating here please thank you.

This comment indicates that although the moderator could not, or did not feel it was necessary, to take official action against the behaviours they observed, they felt that it was important to let the other users know that they were problematic and User 6O's choice of phrasing is particularly interesting in terms of politeness. For example, by using an interrogative sentence structure, they make their request more indirect and therefore less threatening towards their own positive face needs and the negative face needs of others (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955). That they immediately follow 'please' with 'thank you', however, diverges from what we would expect to see in a typical turn-taking scenario as these two politeness-invoking phrases would usually appear a turn apart in order to give the other interlocutor the chance to respond. It is possible that this is done with the intention of thanking in advance, something which Burke and Kraut (2008) identify as a form of linguistic politeness that is used to avoid imposing upon others, thereby protecting their negative face needs and encouraging them to respond affirmatively to a request. However, by not giving the other users time to respond to the plea before thanking them for doing as was asked, User 6O also flouts Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, leaving the other users unable to participate in the exchange or to negotiate a different outcome. User 6O therefore

leaves no room for argument and so this phrasing may instead be interpreted as a claim to their authority which takes for granted that other users will cooperate with the request. These interpretations position User 6O as someone who is fair but firm about enforcing the rules whilst their moderator role reminds users that their warnings should be heeded as they ultimately have the power to sanction those who break the rules.

And yet, several users responded to this post by restating the perceived legitimacy of their concerns for the OP's state of mind and defending their speculation about possible causes for their behaviour, whilst others continued to speculate about what such causes could be. These posts indicated that the users had not in fact acted upon the unofficial request because they felt that the OP's repeated posting was problematic and they did not feel that the admod response had been sufficient, thereby challenging the authority of the admods and threatening the moderator's positive face needs. This practice is striking as it suggests that, although the admods have the power to act upon the behaviour of other members, the membership hierarchy in the AVEN CoP is not so much a linear model which assigns power according to positions within the structure, as Davies (2005) argues, but one of 'differential levels of status' (Moore, 2006: 612). A structure such as this, described by Eckert and Wenger (2005: 586) in the context of the burnout group in an American high school as more 'egalitarian' and without an 'integrated status hierarchy', means that AVEN CoP members can perceive one another as equals whose views and decisions can be challenged or accepted, regardless of their membership role.

This raises some pertinent questions about the hierarchy in the AVEN CoP. This is because, although the admod roles on AVEN are voluntary, when acting in their official capacities, admods often behave in ways reminiscent of managers in workplace CoPs, with additional responsibilities and powers which necessarily set them apart from the other CoP members. However, where managers often command a level of respect and deference that means subordinate staff are unlikely to feel comfortable challenging them (as shown in Schnurr and Chan, 2011, for example), it is clear from this discussion that this is not always the case with the AVEN admods. This is no doubt compounded by the admods' ability to move between their roles at will – that is, between the official administrative role which is associated with the AVEN organisation and the unofficial, standard user role in which they are more closely aligned with the AVEN CoP and to which they may return full-time when they leave an

admod role. This creates dissonance within their official identities, potentially undermining their authority because other users will regularly encounter their non-official side (similarly, Schnurr, 2009, has shown that close relationships between colleagues may enable challenges to senior staff). This in turn suggests that the admod roles may be viewed as important to the smooth running of the forums, and that the associated power dimensions are accepted by other users, but that these factors alone are not necessarily perceived as gaining them a higher status or putting their decisions beyond reproach.

In response to the comments continuing to challenge the forum rules, there followed two simultaneous[23] posts by a different moderator and an administrator. Both of these users posted using the green and red colouring of official posts, thereby marking an escalation in the admod response to the situation in this thread.

> Post 6.22
> *User 6P – 03/02/2020, 8.53PM (moderator – official)*
> This is just to say that the admod team are aware of the situation here, and all aspects are being reviewed.
> In the meantime, please make sure that nobody ends up with a needless disciplinary review whilst we implement the appropriate actions. [own username]
>
> Post 6.23
> *User 6Q – 03/02/2020, 8.57PM (administrator – official)*
> [Paraphrase: Please remember that it's the admods job to enforce the rules. If you see any content which breaks the rules, please report it to the admods and trust us to deal with it. Please avoid diagnosing other users online.
> [own username], Admin][24]

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[23] Here, simultaneous refers not to the time of posting, which was 4 minutes apart, but to the fact that these posts were being written at the same time, with Post 6.22 not visible to User 6Q until after they had posted Post 6.23.
[24] This user did not consent to their posts being used and so I provide paraphrased summaries in their place.

Post 6.24

User 6Q – 03/02/2020, 8.57PM (administrator - unofficial)

[Paraphrase: Haha, [User 6P] beat me to it. Sorry, guys!]

User 6P's use of the adjectival phrase 'aware of the situation' and the present tense verb phrase 'are being reviewed', in relation to the complaints raised, conveys an active response to the situation and was used to assure users that their complaints were not being ignored. Similarly, User 6Q urged the other users to consider AVEN's policies, presupposing that the users were already aware of what these policies were. By drawing upon the communal resource of the ToS, User 6Q oriented the other users towards an agreed-upon protocol in an attempt to guide them towards more appropriate behaviour, using the ToS to add legitimacy to their request. This practice is telling as it positions the admods as brokers (Wenger, 1998) between the AVEN organisation and the AVEN CoP. In this sense, they conveyed and enforced the formal rules of the organisation across the divide and helped to make them intelligible and relevant to particular aspects of life on the forums. Whilst there is nothing to stop the standard CoP members from alluding to the rules in this way, it is the hierarchical superiority of the admod role (see Section 4.4), and their ability to impose sanctions when rules are broken, that meant they were able to invoke these rules and require users to adhere to them.

Similarly, in declaring that enforcing the rules is the responsibility of the admods, User 6Q signalled a shared stance of responsibility with the other admods, subsequently implying, by contrast, that rule enforcement is not the job of the standard users. They therefore utilised the authorisation ToI to assign responsibility to the admods whilst omission of the standard users from this statement implicitly illegitimated them from doing the same. Both User 6P and User 6Q also directly appealed to the other users to avoid breaking the rules, with the adverb 'please' used by both admods to soften the force of their imperative statements in a further example of repressive discourse (Holmes, 2000) which attends to the positive face needs of the other forum users in a gesture of goodwill.

Both of these posts showed that the admods believed the content being posted went against AVEN's ToS and that this warranted a generalised public warning (that is, one which was not directed at any particular user but at everyone equally) that these posts were inappropriate

and that members had other options if they wished to draw attention to their concerns. User 6P's use of the adjective 'needless' to modify the noun 'disciplinary review' suggests that they believed the users in question (mostly long term, experienced users with post counts in the thousands or tens of thousands) knew better than to be engaging in such behaviour and risking disciplinary action in the first place. In this sense, users who occupy higher positions in the forum hierarchy on account of their greater experience and familiarity with the forums are potentially held to a higher standard than newer users as they are expected to be well-versed in the rules.

Shortly after making their first post, however, User 6Q made another, this time in the standard black typeface which symbolised them taking a step back from their official role. This is a particularly striking example of the partialness and positionality principles (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) in action, with this user positioning themselves towards different aspects of their AVEN identity in quick succession. That they also apologised for repeating the reprimand suggests that they were wary of coming across as too heavy handed. They recognised their perceived wrong doing and therefore threatened their own positive face needs but, as a result, they sought to strengthen the negative faces of the other participants in the thread by acknowledging that they had been unwittingly imposed upon. Thus, User 6Q utilised the politeness techniques of apology and self-effacing humility to attend to the other users' negative face needs (Park, 2008) and to reduce any sense of imposition or the creating of social distance between the admods and the standard users. This in turn helped to diffuse any friction caused by the accidental double reprimand. Ultimately these techniques served to place User 6Q back on the same social level as the standard users and to avoid conflict in a situation which had only been intended to serve as a gentle warning.

User 6Q's consideration of their approach towards the issues in this thread therefore enabled them to manage their competing responsibilities as an admod with their desire to remain on friendly terms with their fellow users. This in turn prevented them from losing the respect of the other users, which also likely encouraged compliance with their official request to follow the rules. This was indicated by the users who had speculated about the OP's health not commenting again following these official postings. After a further comment from another user who sought to defend the OP against some of the previous questioning about their

mental state, the thread came to an end with no more users choosing to participate. Thus, this silent response to the admod requests represents acceptance of their authority on this issue.

The analysis of the content of this thread has shown how the AVEN admods intervene to ensure that members remain safe and respected within the forums. Although they do not seek to stop users from identifying problematic content and requesting that it be assessed, they remind users that the AVEN organisation believes there is a correct way to go about this and that users who do not follow such advice will be challenged and, where appropriate, will be disciplined accordingly. This indicates a level of gatekeeping, with the admod team responsible for determining what counts as reasonable and unreasonable conduct and therefore safeguarding the welfare of its members. However, it also indicates a degree of negotiation, with the admods working with the regular forum members to address their concerns in a safe and egalitarian way, enabling these standard members to remain full CoP members who can legitimately influence the direction that the community takes (Wenger, 1998).

6.3 Summary

In focusing upon the role of the CoP in user interactions with the AVEN forums, this chapter has shown that AVEN members come together on the forums to support and validate one another and the majority of users perceive this solidarity as beneficial and gain positively from the sharing of experiences. The forums therefore occupy an important part of their lives and many users expressed a keenness to contribute to the lives of other members as a way of giving back. Whilst users are guided by these shared endeavours, however, it has also become clear that differing views can cause tension within the forums when it comes to debating and developing understandings of asexuality and that these can impact negatively upon perceptions of inclusivity and tolerance. As has been shown, the power enacted by the admods in enforcing forum rules is particularly important to ensuring that the forums remain good-natured and that AVEN’s members are protected from offence and harm.

This chapter has also shown that the formalised hierarchy between the admods and standard users facilitates the admod team in carrying out their work, providing them with the authentication to make requests of other users and to expect them to be carried out. However,

I have also shown that this hierarchy alone does not guarantee compliance and that the admods must engage in careful negotiations to balance their staff and social identities within the forums and to avoid over-imposing upon the lower ranked members of the community. I have suggested that this, in turn, can help to encourage compliance indirectly.

The following chapter will build upon these ideas, exploring the ways in which definitions of asexuality (see Chapter 5) and community practices and membership influence the ways in which AVEN's members associate with the forums and the wider allosexual world.

7 Locating Asexuality in an Allonormative World

In Chapter 5, I looked at how asexuality is defined by AVEN members and the influence that this has on issues of inclusivity and normativity. This was followed, in Chapter 6, by a consideration of the ways in which the structure and ethos of the forums enable and constrain the claiming of asexual identities. This chapter looks in more detail at how the asexual identities constructed within the AVEN forums come to interact with the allosexual world outside. In essence, then, this chapter explores how AVEN members navigate the experience of being 'othered' by allosexual society and negotiate allonormative ideologies.

As discussed in Section 2.2, identity is, at least in part, a process of aligning and disaligning with identity categories and communities. Thus, the ways in which the AVEN CoP and its members identify with and against the AVEN organisation, and the ways in which members of the AVEN CoP position themselves in relation to other sexual identities, can shed light on what it means to identify as asexual in the AVEN context. This chapter therefore draws upon Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of relationality (identities are constructed in relation to other identity categories and groups) and positionality (identities are built upon macro-level demographic categories).

This chapter reflects upon the findings from Chapters 5 and 6, considering all four of my research questions, with question 2 being particularly pertinent:

2) What impact does (allo)normativity have upon asexual identities?

The chapter begins with Section 7.1 which looks at how a sense of not belonging to allosexual society or LGBTQ+ communities[25] leads users to the AVEN forums and what impact this relationship has upon how asexual individuals, and the AVEN community, perceive their identities. Section 7.2 then explores the issue of coming out in terms of how it enables asexual people to assert their asexual identities and how asexual experiences of coming out compare to those of LGBTQ+ people. It also considers the influence of allonormativity upon asexual coming out experiences.

[25] These groups are not mutually exclusive – LGBTQ+ communities form a part of allosexual society – but their separation in this thesis reflects the focus of my participants' discussions.

7.1 Relationship with allosexual society and LGBTQ+ communities

As discussed in Section 2.3.1, CoPs do not exist in isolation but gain relevance from their relationship with other CoPs and organisations (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). In Chapter 6, I looked at how AVEN's members construct a shared CoP identity through their interactions within the forums. This sub-section builds upon that analysis to consider how this CoP identity is positioned in relation to wider allosexual society and to LGBTQ+ groups, in terms of shared values and issues of belonging. As shall be shown, this is important because AVEN is seen to offer something which these other communities cannot: support and solidarity that is specifically tailored to the experiences of asexual people. In this sense, then, AVEN's provision of a site for discussion, socialisation and community organising is deemed important because these features are not available elsewhere. This mirrors the findings of DeHaan *et al*. (2013) who showed that online LGBT resources have value for LGBT youth because they struggle to find, or be comfortable searching for, information about health and sexuality in the offline world.

In section 2.1.2.1, I showed that asexuality occupies an awkward position in relation to definitions of sexuality because these definitions take for granted the presence of some kind of sexual attraction and leave little room for the existence of an identity for which sexual attraction plays little to no part. This reifies allosexuality as the norm with asexuality positioned as a marked category which does not fit within the allonormative structure of society (as shown starkly in the case of the Kinsey Scale[26] (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948a; Kinsey *et al.*, 1948b) where non-sexuality is represented by 'X' on an otherwise numbered scale). This idea is further compounded by definitions of asexuality which, as shown in Chapter 5, routinely define asexuality in terms of negated allosexuality and therefore position asexuality as something which defies allonormative expectations.

Allonormativity is therefore an important concept for understanding how asexuals relate to the world around them. It indicates that their lives are not only subject to ideologies imposed by heteronormativity (defined in Section 2.1.2.3) but also that sexuality more widely is a taken-for-granted fact of life, with everyone expected to desire sex and a partner and to be

[26] Based upon a mass survey of sexual behaviour, the Kinsey Scale contains 7 categories from 'exclusively heterosexual' (Rating: 0) to 'exclusively homosexual' (Rating: 6). Asexual behaviours are often taken to be represented by an 8th rank, X, which covers 'non-sexual' behaviour.

able to relate to the sexual exploits of people in real life and fictitious characters. For individuals who do not relate to these experiences, allonormativity may become exclusionary and challenge their sense of belonging to mainstream societies which are dominated by these ideals. Issues of belonging and not belonging are therefore central to understanding engagement with the AVEN CoP.

These points indicate that the reach of allonormative ideals is extensive and pervasive and can have a significant, detrimental impact upon the mental wellbeing and identifications of asexual people. Indeed, many of my survey respondents commented that living in a highly sexualised society, with allonormative ideals influencing attitudes towards their lack of sexual attraction, has led them to feel out of place, unable to understand or experience aspects of the world in the same way as the people around them, something which one survey respondent referred to as 'the problems of being ace in an oversexualised world'. For this reason, many recall feeling isolated and struggling to fit in with their allosexual peers, something which is important to constructing asexual identities as it represents non-alignment with allosexual identities. As shall be shown below, these feelings of not belonging can negatively impact upon the identities that asexual people construct and push them to look for communities in which they do feel a sense of belonging and from which their identities can take more positive influences. This section draws predominantly upon the responses to my survey with examples of forum posts used to illustrate the ways in which these issues are discussed within AVEN.

7.1.1 Being othered by allosexual cultures

62.5% of my respondents (70 individuals) said their asexuality had led them to feel lonely, with a lack of asexual friends and not having anyone to share or understand asexual experiences with being common factors (Question 21.8). Indeed, 50.9% of my survey respondents (58 individuals) stated that they did not know any asexual people outside of specifically asexual contexts (Question 29) and the following comments elaborate on this theme:

(7.1) I still don't know a single other asexual

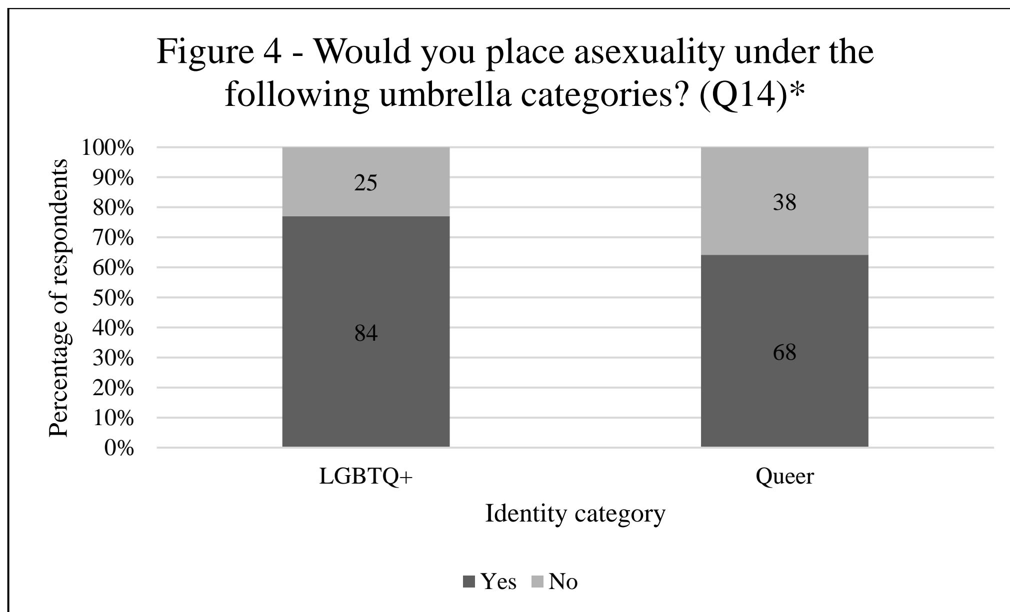
(7.2) I don't see/hear my experience talked about or represented, which is isolating

The use of the adverb ‘still’ in (7.1) epitomises the degree of isolation this respondent feels by suggesting that this has been the case for a lengthy period, whilst the indirect negation of ‘single’ emphasises the complete lack of such people in their life. The adjective ‘other’ adds to this idea by showing that this individual sees themself as asexual but feels alone in this identity. Response (7.2), meanwhile, attributes a lack of representation of their experiences to being the cause of feelings of isolation, with the pairing of the verbs ‘see’ and ‘hear’ indicating that this lack of representation occurs in multiple settings. These factors point to a desire for contact with others who have similar experiences and many of the survey respondents and forum users in my data set therefore reported turning towards LGBTQ+ friends and communities for support and solidarity.

However, there is some disagreement, amongst my own participants, other asexual people and LGBTQ+ individuals and groups in the wider literature, about whether asexuality is or should be included as LGBTQ+ or queer (see, for example, Bogaert, 2015). As a reclaimed term for gay and lesbian identities which is perceived as less pathologising and more inclusive, queer is increasingly used as ‘an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications’ (Jagose, 1996: 1; see also Brontsema, 2004) that avoids relying upon the ever-growing and increasingly-cumbersome acronym (LGBTQ+) which can exclude identities not represented by their own letters (Zosky and Alberts, 2016) . However, whilst the elastic definition of queer is potentially inclusive of asexuality, some argue that the term is applied too broadly (see, for example, discussions in Dilley, 1999; Baker, 2008) and that this results in the diminishing of its political efficacy and delegitimising the work of gay rights movements (Kross, 2014). As such, it is clear that asexuality may not always be welcome under the queer, and potentially LGBTQ+, umbrellas.

When an ‘A’ is included in the acronym, it is often used to refer to ‘allies’ (that is, non LGBTQ+ individuals who support LGBTQ+ people and causes) as well as or instead of ‘asexuals’ (see, for example, Kiesling, 2019). This suggests that asexuality may be conflated with cisgender heterosexuality or, otherwise, that it is not recognised as a relevant LGBTQ+ category. I was therefore interested to find out how the respondents of my survey felt about belonging to LGBTQ+ and queer groups and so I asked whether they would place asexuality under either of these umbrella categories (Question 14), with the option of answering either

‘yes’ or ‘no’, and accompanied this with space for them to elaborate upon their answer (Question 14a).



*Number of respondents shown on bars

Of those who responded to this question (see Figure 4), 77% (84 individuals) believed that asexuality should be included in the LGBTQ+ category and 64% (68 individuals) felt that it should be classified as queer. This indicates that my survey respondents were largely in favour of asexuality’s inclusion in these categories, albeit with a greater tendency to view asexuality as LGBTQ+ than queer. However, looking at the elaboration part of this question, there sometimes emerges a disjuncture between wanting to belong within these categories and perceptions of being rejected from or marginalised within them, as demonstrated in the following examples.

(7.3) Our experiences, like those of the LGBTQ+ community, do not fit with the heterosexual norm (even for hetero romantic aces), and while the struggles we face are sometimes different from those of the rest of the LGBTQ+ community I think there is enough common ground that we should belong.
So much for the rational explanation, there's also the purely emotional, visceral one I can't really explain properly, it just feels like we should belong.

(7.4) […] I like the idea of being able to identify with LGBTQ+ or queer identities, but I'm not sure how other people in these groups see asexuals, and I don't want to tread on any toes.

(7.5) I just don't feel the hassle of arguing [with] people in the LGBTQ+ community is worth their acceptance of us. Chances are, our issues would continue to be placed on the back burner regardless. Yes, we are queer, and yes, I believe we should be allowed into the LGBTQ+, but I'm not sure I think the backlash is worth it.

(7.6) […] But now I've seen such a negative backlash online, of LGBT+ people being vehemently against including asexuals in their community. It made me wonder if it was wrong for me to identify as queer. […]

Perhaps the most dominant motivation for including asexuality within the LGBTQ+ and queer categories is similarity of experience, particularly in terms of these identities not adhering to heterosexual norms. This alludes to a common practice of binarising heterosexuality with non-heterosexuality (see, for example, Dilley, 1999 and Brontsema, 2004), the latter of which then comes to be represented by groupings such as 'LGBTQ+' or 'queer'. This subsequently creates a need for asexuality to fit within one of the two binary categories. In Response (7.3), the use of the simple negative element 'not', in the phrase 'do not fit with the heterosexual norm', creates a relationship of difference between asexuality and heterosexuality (an example of distinction), whilst the use of the preposition 'like', in the embedded clause 'like those of the LGBTQ+ community', creates one of similarity with LGBTQ+ identities (an example of adequation), albeit whilst suggesting that this is an outgroup to which the respondent, and by extension asexuality, is not a part. This use of the adequation and distinction ToIs positions asexuality as closer to LGBTQ+ than heterosexuality and, thus, asexuality derives meaning from being more closely connected to the othered category – that is, asexuality also comes to be viewed as a non-normative 'other'. This shared rejection of heteronormative ideals is therefore seen by some individuals to represent sufficient common ground for inclusion within the LGBTQ+ and queer categories.

The respondent in (7.3) refers to this as a 'rational explanation', in which the adjective 'rational' suggests that this claim for inclusion is a response to an evidential basis of similarity. However, they contrast this rationality with a 'purely emotional, visceral' explanation which is based upon feelings. The adjective 'visceral' highlights the depth of this

emotional belief whilst the adverb ‘purely’ disconnects this emotionality from any semblance of rationality. In both cases, this respondent uses the modal verb ‘should’, in the repeated declarative construction ‘we should belong’ to stress their belief that both the rational and emotional arguments lead to the same outcome, mandating asexuality’s inclusion in the LGBTQ+ category.

Response (7.4) also draws upon both rationality and emotionality to frame this individual’s beliefs. They characterise belonging to LGBTQ+ and queer identities as theoretically possible, as indicated by the noun ‘idea’ and the adjective ‘able’, and they take a stance of appreciation towards this possibility via the use of the affective verb ‘like’. Responses (7.3) and (7.4) are therefore illustrative of not only a perceived logical connection between asexuality and other minority sexual and gendered identities but also of a strong emotional pull that some asexuals feel towards the LGBTQ+ and queer monikers. These ideas resonate with Anderson’s (2016 [1983]) concept of imagined communities in that a sense of solidarity and companionship with LGBTQ+ groups, and overlapping goals for increasing visibility and tolerance, leads some asexual people to feel a stronger and more significant connection to LGBTQ+ groups than heterosexuality.

However, in spite of these ideas of commonality and connection, many of my survey respondents also stated that although they would like to consider asexuality a part of LGBTQ+ and queer groups, they were uncertain about asexuality’s position in relation to them. For instance, Response (7.4) uses the coordinating conjunction ‘but’ to juxtapose the aforementioned emotional connection to these categories with an acknowledgement that asexuals may not be welcome within them. This individual expresses uncertainty via the use of the negated adjective ‘sure’ in the subjective phrase ‘I’m not sure’ and pairs this with the clause ‘I don’t want to tread on any toes’ which suggests a desire not to intrude upon the domain of others. This phrase therefore positions asexuality as a potential interloper and thus this respondent implies that they are not only aware of a potential for conflict with these other minority groups but also that they seek to mitigate against causing harm by not laying claim to these labels without the permission of existing members of these groups. This in turn suggests that asexual people may lack agency when it comes to fitting in with LGBTQ+ communities and there is some similarity here with Hughes (2008)’s findings that older

LGBTQ+ people may feel unwelcome amongst – and therefore seek to distance themselves from – gay cultures which cater predominantly to younger audiences.

This respondent's deferral to the opinions of LGBTQ+ communities, and their desire to avoid causing offence, indicates that they believe these communities have the right to decide who is admitted into their ranks, something also indicated via the use of the verb 'allowed' in (7.5). These respondents therefore suggest an awareness that LGBTQ+ people are agentive in admitting or rejecting people from these categories and also that asexuality may not be perceived as sharing enough similarities with these other groups. In this sense, they position other sexual and gendered minorities as being hierarchically superior in the context of LGBTQ+ groups, having the power to authorise and authenticate the queer credentials of lower ranked identities or to otherwise illegitimise and denaturalise them via rejecting their inclusion. As a perceived lower ranking identity, then, asexuality is positioned by these respondents as being subjected to the will of those at the pinnacle of the LGBTQ+ hierarchy, a form of oppression which mirrors Blackshaw's (2010) example of peasants and lords of the manor.

A particularly striking example of this can be found in the extract from Response (7.6). This individual wrote at length about identifying as LGBTQ+ and queer as a result of their queer friends including them within these labels, again indicating that they believe queer people have the power and agency to include or exclude people from these categories. They also rationalised their belief that they and their asexuality could be included in these categories by again binarising them, this time against the category 'cishet[27]' and, like respondent (7.4), they reported liking the idea of this inclusion. The extract of interest here, however, refers to a 'negative backlash online, of LGBT+ people being vehemently against including asexuals in their community'. That the noun 'backlash', already imbued with negative connotations, is further pre-modified with the adjective 'negative' serves to emphasise the perceived violence of this rejection of asexuals from these categories. So too does the adverb 'vehemently' which adds additional force to the preposition 'against'.

Most tellingly, the sentence which follows, 'It made me wonder if it was wrong for me to identify as queer', shows that, despite the affirmative stance of their offline queer friends and

[27] A contracted form of 'cisgender heterosexual'.

their understanding of what it means to be queer, these negative experiences of online LGBTQ+ communities led this individual to question their right to identify in this way. The use of the pronoun 'it', which refers anaphorically to the negative backlash, indicates that this alone caused them to question their use of 'queer' whilst the adjective 'wrong' negatively evaluates their practice of using 'queer' in their identity, perhaps in a moral as well as a literal sense. Even so, their use of the verb 'wonder' and the conditional conjunction 'if' indicate that their identity remained in a state of uncertainty. Responses such as this make it clear that LGBTQ+ and queer groups are not always amenable to including asexuals within their ranks and that this gatekeeping can result in asexuals feeling excluded from these groups. This can, in turn, have a detrimental impact upon the ways in which asexual people identify, illegitimating and denaturalising (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) claims to a queer identity. This can be especially alienating for individuals who initially experience confusion over their asexual identity and then come to discover that even this label occupies an unstable and contested position in the context of other minority sexual identities.

In terms of the reasons why asexuality may not be accepted in these minority categories, there was some acknowledgement of the fact that asexuals may face different issues to those of other LGBTQ+ groups, for instance, that asexuality is less outwardly visible and so is less likely to invoke public ire. On this basis, there was some acceptance from respondents that members of LGBTQ+ groups might not feel that asexuals share enough common ground to warrant inclusion in this category.

Responses (7.3) and (7.5) both acknowledge that asexuals sometimes face different issues to those faced by LGBTQ+ people. Response (7.3) makes this explicit via using the adjective 'different' in reference to the struggles faced by the asexual community whilst, in (7.5), the possessive pronoun 'our' in the phrase 'our issues' suggests that the issues in question are specific to asexuals and may therefore not be shared by other groups. However, these two respondents frame the perceptions that LGBTQ+ and queer communities have of this difference as being varied. Response (7.3) minimises the salience of this difference via preceding the clause with the subordinating conjunction 'while' and following it with the belief that there is still 'enough common ground' for belonging, in which the adjective 'enough' indicates that although this overlap may not be large, it remains sufficient. This thereby creates a relationship of adequation between asexuality and LGBTQ+ groups.

Meanwhile, (7.5) indicates that the respondent believes the issues faced by asexuals would not be deemed an important focus for LGBTQ+ and queer groups, even if asexuals were to be accepted within them. Their use of the verb 'continue' and the adverb 'regardless' suggest that this respondent believes that this is something which is already happening and that will not change going forwards, despite efforts made by asexuals to highlight their issues. Consequently, we see that whilst respondents such as (7.3) take an optimistic stance towards the impact of perceived differences, believing that they can be overlooked, respondents such as (7.5) take a more pessimistic stance, believing that this difference serves to distinguish asexuality from LGBTQ+ and queer groups, acting as a barrier which leads to its inevitable exclusion from these communities.

Responses such as (7.5) show that fear of a backlash makes many asexuals wary of trying to lay claim to LGBTQ+ and queer identities. The use of the phrase 'the hassle of arguing' is telling as it shows that the inclusion of asexuals within these groups is not guaranteed and must therefore be fought for, with the abstract noun 'hassle' suggesting that this is an arduous and unwanted process for those who must engage in it. This process is also presented as an ongoing, continual negotiation of membership, as indicated by the present tense verb 'arguing', which resonates with other processes of identity construction, such as coming out, which are said to be inescapable, lifelong endeavours (see, for example, Liang, 1997). By implying that asexuality's inclusion in LGBTQ+ and queer categories must also be continually negotiated, then, this response, like Response (7.6), highlights the fact that asexuality occupies an inconsistent and often marginalised position in relation to these umbrella categories of minority sexual identities and that asexuals must fight for their perceived right to be included.

Response (7.5) evaluates this fight for inclusion negatively. Like (7.3), it uses the modal verb 'should' to stress the belief that asexuality warrants inclusion in LGBTQ+ and queer groups but the repeated use of the negated adjective 'worth' shows that, having weighed up the anticipated costs of arguing for inclusion, the individual does not believe that the end result can satisfy the necessary means for achieving it. Thus, we see that if the support and solidarity which is sought from LGBTQ+ and queer communities is not granted, this may inevitably temper the desire that some asexual people have to join them.

Looking to the forums, there is also the sense that existing levels of inclusion of asexuality in LGBTQ+ groups is inadequate, as indicated in the following post:

> Post 7.1
> *User 7A, 29/08/2020, 5.29AM*
> […] I just wish that even if it's there and included that it would be more generally accepted to talk about it rather than just like "we include you, what more do you want?"

Whilst this user acknowledges that asexuality is sometimes included under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, they contend that this does not necessarily amount to asexuality being understood or treated equally to other minorities within these groups. User 7A uses the adverb 'just', which serves as a minimiser, in the quotative verb phrase 'just like' to imply that the imagined argument which follows is reductive and undermines what asexual people hope to achieve via inclusion in the acronym – that is, not just inclusion but also understanding and solidarity. 'Just' is also used in the verb phrase 'I just wish' in which it signifies that User 7A believes this to be a simple hope and not too much to ask from LGBTQ+ communities. The imagined attitude expressed in the interrogative 'what more do you want?' is also notable as this creates a sense of fatigue with the issue, with the pronoun 'more' suggesting that the asexual community is perceived to have already asked for a lot and that their requests are perceived as becoming tiresome. The use of the verb phrase 'do you want?' is also more face threatening than the alternative phrase 'would you like?', suggesting a degree of conflict with LGBTQ+ groups. Also of note here is the use of the phrase 'we include you' in which the third person inclusive pronoun 'we' gives agency to LGBTQ+ people by positioning them as active in the act of inclusion whilst asexual people are represented by the passively framed second person pronoun 'you', positioning them as subject to the will of LGBTQ+ people. These features therefore suggest that, like the respondent in Response (7.3), User 7A perceives asexuals as being marginalised by hierarchically superior members of LGBTQ+ groups.

Following this post, another user acknowledged and supported User 7A's interpretation of the situation, adding their own thoughts to strengthen the argument and to emphasise their belief that asexuality still has a way to go before it achieves full parity with other sexual and gender

minorities. In this sense, these users acknowledge a hierarchy in the imagined LGBTQ+ community which, although potentially willing to admit asexuals into their ranks, may nevertheless marginalise them and prevent their issues from being fully accommodated (Davies, 2005; Eckert, 2000).

Whilst the aforementioned examples of survey responses and forum posts generally advocate inclusion in LGBTQ+ and queer groups, even if they do not feel that inclusion is currently forthcoming, other survey respondents disassociated from or expressed uncertainty about their right to identify using these terms.

(7.7) "Queer" is loaded with a lot of very sensitive history and I don't think asexuality by itself has enough to do with that history.

(7.8) I also notice that the lgbtq+ don't want the hetero-romantic to be in the community because they see them as part of the population that are oppressing lgbtq+ people

(7.9) I find it really odd that asexuality is considered within these groups. I think of asexuality as asexuality. You have so many groups saying what they are attracted to, but asexuality is the null value. I do not think we should be in a group of those that are expressing their sexuality so diversely when we are the polar opposite. Its like putting the color of black, the color void of all colors, in a rainbow.

In terms of queer, Response (7.7) indicates that it is the historical associations of this term which are deemed problematic. Originally used as an offensive reference for gay and lesbian identities, 'queer' has more recently been reclaimed by some members of these groups as a less pathologising and more inclusive term which may be used in place of 'homosexual' or 'gay' (Jagose, 1996). It is also increasingly being used as 'an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications' (Jagose, 1996: 1) which avoids relying upon the ever-growing and increasingly-cumbersome acronym (LGBTQ+) which can be seen to exclude those identities not currently represented by their own letters (Zosky and Alberts, 2016). This suggests that asexuality can be legitimately classified as a queer identity and yet, it is clear from responses such as (7.7) that, as members of a relatively newly established sexual identity, asexual people have not shared the experience of being on the receiving end of 'queer' as a derogatory term and therefore should not feel entitled to claim it for themselves.

Response (7.7) acknowledges the history of the term with the phrase ‘a lot of very sensitive history’ in which the pronoun ‘a lot’ and the intensifier ‘very’ emphasise the extent of the sensitivity of which users of this term need to be aware. The use of the verb ‘loaded’ suggests not only that this term is burdened by its history but also, via the association that ‘loaded’ has with weaponry, that inappropriate use of this term is perceived as a potential trigger for a backlash. This respondent also uses the subjective verb phrase ‘I don’t think’ to indicate their stance of rejecting calls for ‘queer’ to be used to refer to asexuality, with the indirectly negated pronoun ‘enough’ indicating a distance between asexuality and the sensitive history of queer which this individual perceives as illegitimating asexual claims to this label. As an exemption to this, however, the phrase ‘asexuality by itself’ raises the possibility that individuals with intersectional identities which encompass labels from other parts of the LGBTQ+ spectrum (such as transgender or homoromantic asexuals) could legitimately claim a queer identity. This idea resonates with Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) partialness principle in that it reminds us that an individual’s asexuality will never be the entirety of their identity.

This idea that some asexual identities could be more entitled to claim membership of LGBTQ+ and queer groups than others was an important consideration for a number of respondents. Many identified the possible inclusion of heteroromantic asexuals in these groups as particularly controversial and as a perceived cause of LGBTQ+ reluctance to accept any kind of asexuality into their ranks (this is therefore an example of the kind of sidelining of a subsection of the community which Jones (2007) identified in his research on Chinese men who have sex with men). The challenges posed by heteroromanticism are widely acknowledged within the AVEN community and are sometimes seen to colour attitudes against asexuality, preventing it from being taken seriously as a sexuality which exists outside of the ideological bounds of heteronormative society. Response (7.8) alludes to this idea by commenting that heteroromantic asexuals are seen as ‘part of the population that are oppressing lgbtq+ people’. The prepositional phrase ‘part of’’ suggests that heteroromantic asexuals may be seen to hold a meronymic relationship with the wider heterosexual society which is denoted by the noun ‘population’. This therefore positions them as being perpetuators, if not perpetrators, of a perceived heteronormative oppression which marginalizes LGBTQ+ people and, as such, suggests that heteroromantic asexuals are often viewed as being more closely aligned with heterosexual rather than LGBTQ+ ideologies.

That this respondent, and many others besides, are aware of these perceptions, and are cognizant of the impact that they have upon acceptance of asexuality as a whole, represents a rupture within the AVEN community that creates tension because it impacts upon the identities that are accessible to all asexual people. However, looking back to Response (7.3), we see a more inclusive attitude towards heteroromantic asexuals which again points to the disparate views of the AVEN community. When making the point that asexual experiences do not fit within heterosexual norms, they stipulate that this is true '(even for hetero romantic aces)'. That they feel the need to state this is indicative of the fact that many perceive heteroromantic asexuals as being different to the rest of the asexual population in this regard, representing a challenge to the legitimacy of asexuals claiming inclusion in the LGBTQ+ and queer categories. Thus, that this respondent does take the time to include this addition shows that, in this individual's mind, at least, heteroromantic asexual experiences do also exist outside of normative heterosexual ideals.

Other respondents stated that they do not believe that asexuality fits within LGBTQ+ and queer categorisations as it does not share enough common ground with other groups within them. This represents a contrasting view to those responses, discussed above, which adequate asexual and LGBTQ+ experiences for the sake of seeking solidarity and unity. Response (7.9) exemplifies these beliefs, with the use of the adjective 'odd', particularly when intensified with 'really', suggesting that the inclusion of asexuality within these umbrella categories is unexpected because it contradicts a perceived logic about where asexuality sits in relation to them. This respondent elaborates on this view by outlining the relationship as they understand it – that asexuality orients away from attraction and is inherently non-sexual whereas LGBTQ+ groups orient towards attraction and are inherently sexual (mirroring the Kinsey formulation mentioned in Section 7.1). This, they argue, marks asexuality as the 'polar opposite' to these other groups which positions asexuality as an outgroup and therefore illegitimates (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) its inclusion within these categories. They also represent this with the visual metaphor 'Its like putting the color of black, the color void of all colors, in a rainbow' which perhaps draws upon the symbolism of the rainbow flag for LGBTQ+ pride and asserts that asexuality, represented by the colour black, does not belong within this spectrum. In this sense, they position asexuality as being distinct (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005) from other minority sexualities and, as indicated by the phrase 'asexuality

is asexuality', they imply that it has an identity of its own and does not require inclusion within other umbrella categories in order to gain meaning or significance.

This section has shown the heterogeneous views held by AVEN members towards whether or not asexuality should be included within the LGBTQ+ or queer categories, with consideration given to the different experiences of members of the community and the perceptions of perceived gatekeepers from other minority sexualities within these umbrella categories. This discussion has shown that whilst some asexual people do feel included within LGBTQ+ and queer groups, others feel marginalised or unrepresented by their views. The difficulties that some asexuals believe they face in terms of gaining recognition from other sexual minority groups therefore provides context for the desire to participate in specifically asexual communities such as AVEN and I explore this further in the following section.

7.1.2 AVEN as a safe space to share experiences

Linked to the issue of feeling alienated by allosexual cultures in the wider world, 57% of my survey respondents (63 individuals) reported turning to AVEN in the hope of connecting with other asexual people and finding a place of safety and security away from allonormative ideals and sex-focused conversations. The following responses demonstrate this:

(7.10) [… the forums] open a new way to talk about asexuality that won't make non asexuals uncomfortable

(7.11) […] I like the fact that I can be friends with people of all genders without having to worry about someone trying to 'pair me up' with them.

(7.12) […] a place here I don't need to be on the lookout for sexual advances/ expectations. A safe space, in other words

Response (7.10) frames AVEN as somewhere that prevents allosexuals from being made to feel uncomfortable. This highlights the dominance of allonormative ideals outside of AVEN and positions asexual discussion as in some way aggravating them, with its ability to challenge, and potentially undermine, pre-conceived allonormative ideologies. This therefore legitimises the idea that AVEN offers a safe space for its members to discuss asexuality without fear of repercussions from allosexuals.

Respondents (7.11) and (7.12) also allude to a sense of security when they negate the verb phrases 'having to worry' and 'need to be on the lookout', respectively, to suggest that although they do not feel that these activities are required on AVEN, they are needed, at least some of the time, outside of the forums. These examples therefore position AVEN as an environment which allows users to escape from unwanted allonormative practices such as sexual advances and being paired up with friends. This in turn highlights a perceived threat in the world away from the forums and that AVEN counteracts this by offering a sanctuary from unwanted sexual attention, as indicated by the noun phrase 'a safe space' in (7.12). This therefore shows that AVEN not only offers somewhere to safely discuss asexual topics without fear of being judged but also somewhere in which individuals can feel protected from the possibility of sexual advances. Thus the AVEN CoP gains significance from offering something – safety and security – which the allosexual world does not. This corresponds to Bucholtz and Hall's relationality principle (2005) in that the CoP's identity is constructed in contrast to the characteristics of allosexual society where acceptance and safety cannot be guaranteed.

Having found this safe space amongst the AVEN CoP, a number of respondents referenced the practice of sharing experiences as a means of community building, as the following survey responses show:

(7.13) Talking about asexual stuff with people who understand, ranting about things that don't usually bother allosexuals and therfore would get me little to no sympathy among my real life friends and finding ace-meetups in real life.

(7.14) To support people of the asexual nature. We bond, we laugh, we cry, we eHug[28] it out & we share things. […]

(7.15) Communication, education, advice, fun & best cake recipes

(7.16) […] Laughing about misunderstandings that happen in the sexual world.

For some individuals, 'venting' or 'ranting' about their frustrations is seen as an important aspect of engagement with other AVEN members and represents a shared practice amongst the CoP. As a result, (7.13) reports using AVEN for 'ranting about things that don't usually

[28] This is internet slang referring to a virtual appropriation of a physical hug. This may take the form of a graphic which depicts a hug but, more often, users will just write the word 'hug(s)', sometimes surrounded by asterisks to indicate that it is an action.

bother allosexuals', in which the verb 'ranting' implies that the individual gains relief from a frustration which builds up away from the forums. The acknowledgement that these frustrations 'don't usually bother allosexuals' creates a sense of distinction between asexual and allosexual identities via pointing to the idea that they have different concerns, with the negated verb 'bother' implying that the respondent has found allosexual people to be unmoved by the concerns of asexual people. Thus we see a disconnection between how AVEN members and other groups, in this case the respondent's 'real life' friends, respond to asexual topics, with AVEN offering a much-needed outlet for negative feelings. By enabling the expression of these feelings, then, the CoP positions them as legitimate and normal parts of life as an asexual which individuals should feel able to disclose without being made to feel that they are defective. This again lends the CoP a sense of being a sanctuary, from the derision of the allosexual world, which facilitates a cathartic release of such tensions.

Whilst the numbers of respondents claiming to have found support and an outlet for marginalised feelings on AVEN is high, these examples show that AVEN provides similar outlets for more light-hearted discussions and that these also form an important part of the culture of the AVEN forums. This indicates that the AVEN identity is not just founded upon problem solving but also upon enjoyment and togetherness. For example, in the sentence 'We bond, we laugh, we cry, we eHug it out & we share things', Response (7.14) utilises a repetition of the 'we + verb' structure to position each of the activities, some positive and some negative, as equally important to life on the forums. These practices are united by the fact that the forums enable members to work through them together with other like-minded individuals rather than in isolation, as indicated via the inclusive pronoun 'we'. Here, then, we see that this respondent positions collaboration as fundamental to the AVEN CoP's culture, implying that users who do not work with other users to address issues cannot be considered full members and instead operate on the edges of the CoP as either peripheral or marginal members (Wenger, 1998).

Response (7.15) also makes reference to both the serious and light-hearted aspects which motivate their use of the forums but this example is perhaps most notable for its reference to the superlative noun phrase 'best cake recipes'. This draws upon the asexual symbol of cake as something which asexuals are said to desire more than sex, a symbol which is well known within the AVEN forums and beyond (Pacho, 2017). It has therefore become a common

practice within the AVEN CoP to greet new users with images of cake as a sign of acceptance and inclusion. Cake recipes, however, are not a standard feature amongst AVEN discussions and so the inclusion of this phrase, and its ideological connotations of domesticity, serves as a tongue-in-cheek 'inside joke' which frames AVEN as everyday and homely. By alluding to this practice, then, this respondent positions themself as someone who is well-versed in the community's practices and its shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) and who feels at home amongst the forums. This in turn suggests that they likely occupy full membership of the CoP and are on either a stable or inbound trajectory (Wenger, 1998), as well as allowing them to index their membership to the CoP.

Meanwhile, (7.16) refers to 'laughing about misunderstandings that happen in the sexual world', showing via the verb 'laughing' that AVEN gives users the opportunity to relax and to make light of situations which, in the sexual world, they might otherwise feel embarrassed by. In this sense, we again see that AVEN normalises and destigmatises experiences which the allosexual world frames as problematic by undermining them and thereby constructing them as less significant. Looking to the forums for examples of how this plays out, the following posts are taken from a thread in which users post about so called 'asexual problems' – issues which arise in an asexual person's life as a result of their asexuality. At the time of writing, this thread contained almost 11,700 posts (having been active since 2013) and was still being added to on a regular basis, indicating that identifying and discussing these issues remain an important part of the AVEN CoP's collective identity.

> Post 7.2
> *User 7B – 17/09/2020, 3.10AM*
> [Summary: When you realize that Netflix and Chill[29] is a euphemism for sex but you didn't know previously. #asexualproblems][30]

[29] A slang phrase used to refer to casual sex.
[30] This user did not consent to their post being used and so I provide a paraphrased summary in its place.

Post 7.3
User 7C – 17/09/2020, 4.09AM
[Quoted Post 7.2]
Then praying you never used that phrase in a conversation without knowing its meaning when everyone else did.

Post 7.4
User 7D – 17/09/2020, 9.34AM
[Quoted Post 7.2]
It is such a stupid phrase to use as a euphamism.

Although it is not possible to analyse the language of Post 7.2, User 7B opened this particular exchange by contributing a new problem to the thread, indicating that the phrase 'Netflix and Chill' had previously been unknown to them and, by extension, to asexual people more widely. They also used a hashtag[31] to attribute their naivety to their asexuality.

Responding to User 7B's post, User 7C implies familiarity with the problem via elaborating upon it, proposing a hypothetical situation in which the individual would be isolated in their lack of knowledge, as indicated via presenting the pronoun 'everyone else' in opposition to the asexual subject. They also suggest that this situation is unwanted via their use of the verb 'praying' which, although not always used to denote a religious practice, nevertheless draws upon the idea that only a higher power could save them from this scenario. They also use 'you' to connect these experiences to those of other users, fostering a sense of community togetherness and solidarity via adequation. By agreeing with User 7B's post, then, and by referring to the experience as one shared by asexual people more generally, User 7C authenticates User 7B's experience as a legitimate asexual problem, thereby creating a sense of adequation between the asexual members of AVEN and distinction between this group and the outside, allosexual world (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005).

[31] Hashtags are used in social media contexts to mark content so that it can be cross-referenced with other content of a similar theme. They can be particularly important to activist movements as they facilitate raising awareness of issues although it is more symbolic than functional within the AVEN forums.

User 7D also authenticates User 7B's experience of confusion. Their use of the affirmative verb phrase 'It is' confirms that the phrase itself is problematic, with the predeterminer 'such' adding emphasis to the derisive noun phrase 'stupid phrase' to highlight this idea further. In doing so, User 7D legitimises Users 7B and 7C's experiences of asexuality inhibiting their understanding of the allonormative world. Perhaps more interestingly, though, by deriding the phrase as illogical and potentially confusing, this user undermines the allonormative perspective and thus positions the asexual perspective as more logical. As a result, they destabilise the prominence of the allonormative ideology in this instance.

These survey responses and forum posts demonstrate that AVEN's provision of a supportive community group allows individuals to come together to attend to their joint enterprises (Wenger, 1998) of offering support and solidarity, as well as to create an environment in which allonormative ideologies can be destabilised and asexual identities and experiences can be normalised and celebrated. This enables them to reconfigure the world in which they live and to construct asexual identities which resist allonormative ideals. This in turn gives the CoP members more agency in determining how their individual and collective identities are constructed and experienced, allowing them to overturn allonormative expectations of asexuality and to reconceptualise it in their own image.

And yet, however beneficial the AVEN community may be for asexual identity making, asexual people cannot remove themselves entirely from allosexual society and so they must continue to live amongst allonormative ideologies and to interact with allosexual people. As a result, they must repeatedly navigate situations in which their asexual identities become an issue, resulting in a need to not only decide whether or not to disclose their sexual identity but also to consider how this can be achieved. As with other minority identities, then, the act of coming out is an important consideration for asexual identity making. The following section explores the relevance to asexuality of existing models of and attitudes towards coming out, including how the act itself enables individuals to assert their asexual identities beyond the forums, and to thereby raise ever greater awareness of asexuality.

7.2 Coming out against an allonormative backdrop

Coming out is often described as being a momentous event in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals (e.g.: Plummer, 1995) and one which may shape a person's identity or perception of their identity going forwards. McCormick (2015: 327) states that coming out 'authenticates a homosexual identity' whilst Chirrey (2003: 24) writes that, for lesbian and gay individuals, coming out is 'that moment of recognising and asserting their gayness'. Indeed, it is deemed to be so significant that many see it as a rite of passage within gay communities and it is a common practice for community members to ask after each other's coming out experiences in what Wood (1997: 257) calls a 'ritualized conversation starter'. Whilst these references all point towards coming out being associated with homosexuality, it is also an important consideration for people coming to understand their identifications with other minority sexual identities (for example, McLean, 2007, and McCormack *et al.*, 2014, have both explored bisexual coming out experiences) and gender identities (see, for example, King's, 2021, research on the experiences of intersex people and Zimman's, 2009, work with transgender individuals). Models for coming out have also been adopted for studying the disclosure of other identities, such as atheism (Cloud, 2017) and disabilities (Swain and Cameron, 1999).

As shall be shown in this section, the act of coming out also has resonance for asexual identities with 92.9% (104 individuals) of my survey respondents stating that they had come out or disclosed their asexual identity to at least one person at some point in their lives (Question 19), with friends and family members being the most common associates with whom coming out had occurred (Question 19a). However, despite this overwhelming tendency for respondents to choose to come out to at least some of their contacts, there was a great deal of disparity as to who respondents had come out to, how many people they had told and why they had chosen to take this step. Exploring this variation can therefore shed light upon what coming out means to AVEN's members and how they believe it impacts upon their own identities and that of the wider asexual community.

Liang (1997) notes that there is no set definition for the phrase 'coming out' and that whether or not an individual can be said to have come out is a subjectively determined matter and one which is measured by degree rather than by binary extremes. Nevertheless, she highlights three distinct features which, either on their own or in combination, can be used to identify an

individual's coming out. The first concerns 'coming out to self' (1997: 291) which involves an individual accepting and being able to admit their sexuality to themself. In the context of AVEN, this was explored in Chapters 5 and 6 where I looked at how AVEN members come to understand their identities via engaging with the AVEN community, learning about and embracing terms which describe their experiences and having those experiences legitimised by other community members.

Liang's second feature is concerned with 'self-disclosure to another' (1997: 292) which necessarily involves a person revealing their sexuality to someone else (whether intentionally or otherwise) and depends upon the other person understanding the message that has been communicated and recognising it as a form of disclosure. In this sense, I posit that successful disclosure is when the individual instance of disclosure is understood by the interlocutor as a disclosure and, in the case of asexuality, where asexuality itself is understood. These ideas will be a key focus of the rest of this chapter and I aim to consider how well Liang's theorisation of coming out to others fits with the issues experienced by asexual people.

The third aspect which Liang identifies is that coming out is processual; that is, it is an ongoing process of continuous reassertion of a sexual identity throughout an individual's life rather than a one-off event. This is necessary because the pervasive nature of society's heteronormative ideals means that heterosexuality is assumed unless evidence exists to the contrary (Liang, 1997) and so numerous occasions arise in which those who do not identify as cisgender heterosexuals must correct such assumptions. In the discussion that follows, I argue that asexual people may also choose to assert their sexual identities in order to challenge allonormativity and to correct assumptions that they are allosexual. As Fine (2019: 25) states, this is important because asexual-identified people, as a group, are 'tasked with confronting and subverting hetero- and allonormative assumptions in order to justify their very existence'.

The process of coming out is therefore important because the more times a person discloses their identity, the more opportunities they have to challenge preconceived notions and assert a different, minority identity. As Liang states in relation to homosexuality, this therefore means that coming out 'not only describes a state of affairs, namely the speaker's gayness, but also brings those affairs, a new gay self, into being' (1997: 293). In this sense, then, coming out

can be interpreted as a speech act (Austin, 1975 [1955]; Searle 2012 [1969]) in that it is both a performative utterance and a transformative action, which moves the individual from a state of questioning their sexual identity to one of knowing it and having it be known to others (for a more detailed discussion of coming out as a speech act, see Chirrey, 2003).

Coming out therefore raises awareness of an identity and this has consequences for the wider community as well as the individuals who come out. Through increasing the visibility of minority sexualities and genders within families, communities and society at large, levels of tolerance and acceptance amongst the heterosexual and cisgender populations are also inevitably increased and this has the potential to lead to the implementation of more and better rights for minorities. The benefits of coming out for the wider community are therefore clear and the following sections explore this further, investigating how allonormativity influences coming out and how coming out in turn challenges allonormativity.

7.2.1 The role of allonormativity in coming out decision-making

As coming out is processual and dependent upon the contexts in which it may occur, individuals must continually weigh up the advantages and disadvantages that this act may bring to their lives. Exploring this reasoning is therefore pertinent, not only for understanding what coming out means to asexual people but also for investigating the impact that allonormativity has upon the decisions that individuals make. These choices may vary across an individual's lifespan, in relation to the circumstances which present themselves; it is therefore important to note that decisions made with regards to coming out in a general sense may not apply to all instances in which the option of coming out is considered. This section draws upon responses elicited from Question 20 of my survey which asked: 'Please describe your reasons for choosing to reveal or not reveal your asexuality to others'. I begin with a number of responses which allude to decisions made in favour of coming out.

(7.17) […] I felt that I couldn't be myself if people didn't know this about me. […]

(7.18) Asexuality is one of my primary lenses for navigating the world; to understand me, one has to understand asexuality.

(7.19) I felt that my husband deserved to know why I'm so reluctant to have sex with him and also why I'm so passive when we do have sex. I didn't want him to think he was the reason I don't like sex, but that it's a part of my orientation. […]

(7.20) […] I feel like I'm not really coming out for myself […] I'm coming out in order to improve society's acceptance one person at a time […] You will always be the educator. You will always have to defend your identity tooth and nail. You are never allowed to be vulnerable. You're not allowed to slip up, because it will be taken as proof that the identity you claim was never real after all. […]

With the dominance of allosexuality leading to it being assumed unless evidence exists to the contrary, coming out can be a necessary process for asexual people to make their identities visible to others, challenging allonormative assumptions and consequently preventing inauthenticity. For example, Response (7.17) alludes to the idea that coming out enables freedom of expression, using the subordinating conjunction 'if' to situate the assertion in an imagined, alternate reality in which the individual had not come out. Their use of the negated modal verb phrase 'I couldn't be myself' then indicates that they feel that being themself would be an impossibility in this alternate reality. The combination of the verb 'be', which indicates an action, and the reflexive pronoun 'myself', which suggests innateness, is also notable as this suggests that this individual views their asexuality, which is conflated with their sense of self, as simultaneously innate and performed. This therefore positions coming out as a means of performing an authentic self, allowing this respondent to assert what they frame as their actual identity, and to consequently dismiss any that might be assumed.

In Response (7.18), meanwhile, the respondent characterises their asexuality as 'one of my primary lenses for navigating the world', in which the adjective 'primary' highlights the significance that this individual believes their asexuality has. The metaphorical reference to their asexuality as a lens suggests that they view the world through their asexuality and that this influences how they see and interpret it. Thus, we see that this respondent frames their asexuality as fundamental to their understanding of the world and this consequently underpins the assertion that 'to understand me, one has to understand asexuality' by suggesting that not understanding asexuality would lead to a significant part of their identity and outlook also not being understood. The use of the modal verb phrase 'has to' is key to this framing as it creates a relationship of obligation between understanding asexuality and

understanding who they are, which is further emphasised by the repetition of the ‘to understand + [noun]’ clause structure. The syntax therefore juxtaposes the nouns ‘me’ and ‘asexuality’ as one and the same, or equals, achieving the same effect as Response (7.17)’s conflation of asexuality with a sense of self. Thus, responses (7.17) and (7.18) frame asexuality as fundamental to their lives and coming out as allowing them to make that important factor visible where it would otherwise be invisible. This undermines allonormative suggestions that sexuality is integral to all humans and indicates an adoption of an individualistic stance towards coming out. This in turn points to the idea that asexuality is a marked category which must be announced in order to bring it to light in a world dominated by allosexuality and to enable asexual people to live authentically and fully.

Where the aforementioned respondents prioritised their own needs when deciding to come out, responses such as (7.19) report being motivated by the needs of others, typically relationship partners. In (7.19), the respondent uses the intensifier ‘so’ to modify the adjectives ‘reluctant’ and ‘passive’ which are used to describe their attitude towards sex with their partner. These attitudes, which are so often positioned as problematic in the context of allonormative relationships, are therefore presented as problems which could be alleviated by their coming out, in turn further marking them as abnormal and in need of being addressed. Meanwhile, the possessive pronoun ‘my’ in the noun phrase ‘my orientation’ serves not only to express ownership of the orientation but could also be interpreted as a sign that this respondent perceived themself as in some way responsible for the issues caused by their asexuality within their relationship.

This is particularly important in light of them framing their husband as deserving, via the use of the verb ‘deserved’. In doing this, the respondent implies that they felt duty bound to reveal their sexuality on account of their husband having in some way earned an explanation, in turn indicating that they perceive their coming out to have an ethical dimension. The clause ‘I didn’t want him to think he was the reason’ suggests the respondent felt that coming out had the potential to correct their husband’s incorrect assumption and, thus, this phrasing allows the respondent to invoke a caring persona which saw them concerned with reassuring their partner that he was not at fault. This implies the dominance of allonormativity by suggesting that the only explanation that the husband previously had for the issues within the relationship were centred around his own potential inadequacies which again highlights the

fact that asexuality is often invisible to allosexual people. In this sense, then, coming out enabled this respondent to utilise their asexuality to take responsibility for the issues in their relationship and to consequently authenticate their partner's allosexual behaviours as unproblematic. As a result, we see that the act of coming out offered this individual the opportunity to form a closer relationship with a loved one (Cooley, *et al*, 2012; Chekola and McHugh, 2012) but, in so doing, reinforced not only asexuality's marginalisation but also its apparent incompatibility with allonormative relationships.

Whilst increasing visibility has been shown to be a consequence of the coming out decisions discussed in respondents (7.17) to (7.19), for the individual in respondr (7.20), this was positioned as their primary concern via dismissing the alternative with the negated declarative 'I'm not really coming out for myself'. In this respect, they connect themself to the wider asexual population via acknowledging that their own coming out experiences have wider implications, thereby indicating that they assume a collectivist view of coming out and positioning themself as sharing in and supporting the AVEN CoP's goal of increasing visibility. This therefore presupposes that visibility of asexuality needs to be increased and, again, that it is currently largely invisible to allosexual society.

However, unlike responses (7.17) to (7.19), which position coming out as freeing or enabling, Response (7.20) frames it as a burden. It uses the verb 'defend' and the adjectival phrase 'tooth and nail' to indicate that the individual perceives coming out as an onerous task and this is further compounded by their allusion to the processual nature of coming out to others in the phrase 'one person at a time' which implies that it is a lengthy and incremental process. They also invoke the positionality principle (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) to characterise asexual people who come out as 'the educator', indicating an awareness of low levels of understanding about asexuality amongst allosexual people and thereby framing coming out as not just a performative speech act but also, simultaneously, as an act of education. By switching from the first person pronoun 'I', in the first two sentences, to the second person pronoun 'you' for the remainder of this extract, they indicate that it is not only them who is tasked with taking on this role of educator but that all asexual people must also assume it too, once again suggesting that asexuality is often invisible and in need of being made visible. Relatedly, the use of the adverbs 'always' and 'never' create a sense of inevitability, with the roles assumed by asexual people when coming out being inescapable. This may be

interpreted as a sign that this individual does not see coming out as being successful at raising awareness because they believe that the need to be educators and defenders will be experienced by asexual people in perpetuity.

Also of note is the use of the adjective 'vulnerable' and the verb phrase 'slip up', both of which are indirectly negated to show that they are not permissible when coming out because they are perceived to invalidate asexuality, as indicated by the negated adjectival phrase 'never real'. In stating this, the respondent suggests that asexual people are not only tasked with coming out to assert asexuality as an identity but also that they are responsible for doing so successfully. This is because an individual's failure to convince others of their asexuality is not only problematic for them as an individual but also has the potential to illegitimise asexuality as a concept, facilitating its dismissal by allosexuals. In this sense, the respondent suggests that asexual people cannot merely assert an asexual identity but must also shoulder the burden of adequately representing it. This in turn highlights the dominance of allornormative ideologies and the power they have to suppress asexuality because they give allosexual people the hierarchical superiority to determine whether or not an asexual coming out is deemed legitimate and to denaturalise the individual's claimed identity, or asexuality in general, if either is perceived to be inadequate or unnecessary. Thus, although asexual people have the agency to attempt to come out, allosexuality may impede this and, in Liang's (1997) terms, coming out may consequently be perceived to have failed in such instances. However, this idea also contradicts Liang's third feature about coming out being processual in that it overlooks the possibility that coming out may be incremental with small steps made towards raising awareness each time an attempt at coming out is made.

These responses show that whether individuals seek to gain freedoms, reassure partners or raise awareness, the dominance of allonormativity and the invisibility of asexuality routinely play a role in their decision making towards coming out. There is also evidence of a delineation between those who view coming out from an individualistic perspective, where they themselves are the primary beneficiary, and those who view it from a collectivist perspective and take a more community-focused stance. I turn now to a number of responses which describe attitudes towards *not* coming out in certain situations which also shed light upon the dominance of allonormativity. In the context of homosexuality, not coming out may be interpreted as a form of passing as it allows the individual to blend in with more dominant

groups (Chekola and McHugh, 2012) and to benefit from normativities inherent to those groups. Literature related to passing is therefore drawn upon in the below discussion in order to ascertain its relevance to the experiences of asexual people.

(7.21) It's not like I'm bringing home sexual partners that I need to explain away…

(7.22) […] I don't want something I choose as a lable to be a large part of the perceptions others have of me. I feel it is incidental or irrelevant to most daily situations.

(7.23) I know my family will not know what it is. I believe they will be accepting but I don't feel comfortable yet explaining this to them.

(7.24) […] I might never reveal my asexuality to my family, because, judging by their blatant homophobia, I don't think it'll go too well.

Whereas the literature on coming out as homosexual notes that it is beneficial for its ability to enable individuals to be free to enter into same-sex relationships without the risk of being outed by them (Cooley *et al*., 2012), Response (7.21) shows that this is less of a concern for some asexual people. By negating the phrase 'bringing home sexual partners…', this respondent makes it clear that this is not part of their lived experience and that, by extension, they have no need to explain their sexuality. They therefore position coming out as a solution to a problem posed by the presence of sexual partners and thus the absence of these partners in their own life renders coming out as unnecessary. Here we see an implied distinction between the experiences of homosexual people and some asexual people with the latter seemingly having less to explain and therefore less stimulus to come out. Asexual people who do not come out, then, may still be able to conduct themselves in an asexual manner, without compromising their own feelings and without needing to be out to others[32]. In this sense, passing for asexuals may be deemed less of an entrapment than Cooley *et al*. (2012) and Chekola and McHugh (2012) suggest that it can be for homosexuals who would need to not enter into same-sex relationships, against their desires, or otherwise hide them.

Where Response (7.21) frames coming out as unnecessary, Response (7.22) frames it as more of a hindrance. They draw upon a discourse of irrelevance to describe their asexuality, with

[32] It is worth noting however, that not all asexual people find that lacking a partner removes the need to explain their sexuality – some, for instance, face the need to explain their continued lack of partners, as this does not adhere to allonormative ideals. And indeed, others who do have partners may also find themselves needing to come out to correct assumptions that those partnerships are allosexual.

the adjective ‘incidental’ and the adjectival phrase ‘irrelevant to most daily situations’ minimising the significance of their asexuality in their own mind. They contrast this with the perception that they believe others would have of their asexuality if they came out, which is indicated via the adjectival phrase ‘large part’. This suggests that they envision their identity becoming usurped by the perceptions and priorities of others and so we again see evidence that some asexual people experience, or fear they will experience, the manipulation of their identities by dominant allonormative ideologies.

Looking to the literature, this is noteworthy because Chekola and McHugh (2012) dismiss claims that a specific identity *can* only be a small part of someone, arguing that refusing to highlight the sexuality which they *do* identify with, by coming out, succeeds only in accepting it as an important issue. This assessment, made in relation to homosexuality and already controversial in that context, becomes particularly problematic when applied to asexuality. This is because sexual identity in asexuals represents an absence of sexuality, ‘a *nonissue* […] not as likely to invade their psychic space and to take front and centre position when their identity is being formed’ (Bogaert, 2015: 90; as shown in Section 5.1.1). Thus, insisting that it constitutes a significant part of their identity disregards the fact that, for some asexual people, their sexual identities are only made into an important issue because of the dominance of allonormativity. By not coming out, then, asexual people can potentially avoid reifying allonormative ideals and enable themselves to exert some control over how other people interpret their identities.

The respondent in Response (7.23) frames their choice not to come out to their family as a protective strategy. They express certainty that their family does not already understand about asexuality, via the use of the verb ‘know’, but express slightly less certainty when using the verb ‘believe’ in reference to their family’s potential acceptance because it is an as-yet-unknown outcome, a common cause for doubt in coming out journeys. However, it is their use of the declarative construction ‘I don’t feel comfortable yet explaining this to them’ which is most telling as the verb ‘explaining’ indicates that it is this rather than the *revealing* of their sexuality which they are unsure of. Indeed, 76.9% (80 individuals) of my survey respondents stated that they had had to explain what asexuality is as part of their coming out experiences (Question 19b). This again points to the idea that asexuality is currently poorly understood in the allosexual world and, as was shown in the analysis of Response (7.20), that

coming out as asexual can be as much about educating others about asexuality as it is about revealing an asexual identity. This corresponds to research by McLean (2007), on bisexual coming out experiences being complicated by multiple meanings for ‘bisexuality’, and Konnelly (2021) who has shown the considerations that non-binary individuals must make when revealing their identities to medical professionals. It follows that individuals such as the respondent in (7.23) may be anxious about having to take on the educator role (in accordance with the positionality principle), particularly in cases where they are new to the concept of asexuality or where they may identify with more complicated identities such as cross-orientations (having romantic and sexual identities which do not align, such as homoromantic asexual) or demisexuality (where they might need to explain sometimes experiencing attraction). This respondent therefore positions their decision not to come out as preventing an uncomfortable experience but the inclusion of the adverb ‘yet’ suggests that this may be a possibility in the future.

The individual writing Response (7.24) attributes their decision not to come out to their family’s homophobia, signalling not only the dominant heteronormative ideals that their family hold but also again linking asexuality to other LGBTQ+ identities. The use of the adjective ‘blatant’ to describe the homophobia indicates that this respondent has witnessed the homophobia and that it is therefore an evidenced rather than a feared or imagined threat. This is given as the reason for their belief that revealing their sexuality would not be well received with the verb phrase ‘judging by’ indicating that this situation has been thought through. The coordinating conjunction ‘because’ in turn positions this as the reason for them potentially never coming out to their family. The link made between homophobia and not coming out as asexual is telling as it suggests that this individual sees homophobia as a threat to their asexuality, thereby indicating a perceived connection between prejudice against homosexuality and prejudice against asexuality. This may also therefore be interpreted as a sign of adequation between homosexual and asexual lived experiences when it comes to the risks associated with coming out and suggests that allonormativity is perceived to have the same influence over attitudes towards asexuality as heteronormativity does to attitudes towards homosexuality.

7.2.2 AVEN community support when preparing to come out

For individuals who do opt to come out, many turn to the AVEN forums to seek advice and reassurance. This subsection looks at examples of forum posts from coming out topics and considers the role the CoP plays in supporting its members on their coming out journeys, and how this helps to undermine allonormative ideals. Given the CoP's aim to increase awareness of asexuality, I had anticipated that it might explicitly encourage members to come out and that members may be particularly motivated to do so. However, the findings below show that the situation is more nuanced and often focused more upon the individual's personal circumstances.

Post 7.5 was submitted in response to a thread in which the OP asked about other users' experiences of coming out (perhaps using the 'ritualised conversation starter' (Woods, 1997) as a means of encouraging engagement) and asked for help because they too wanted to come out. They expressed fear that they wouldn't be believed or that the people they told would think they had been a victim of trauma.

> Post 7.5
>
> User 7E – *09/05/2021, 1.05PM*
>
> I totally understand your fear of coming out bc[33] I have it too. I know my friends think that asexuals are asexuals because of some trauma and it makes me sad. I can't say things I really think so I have to say what people expect or be silent. That's the reason why I want people to understand asexuality and why I want to come out. […]

User 7E first legitimises the OP's fears about being perceived as a victim of trauma but does so via empathising with the OP in the form of the phrases 'I totally understand' and 'I have it too' so that they do not stoke those fears further. They also recount their own knowledge of their friends' beliefs that asexuality is a result of trauma and assess this situation with the phrase 'It makes me sad'. By taking an affective stance towards this situation, User 7E demonstrates their ability to empathise, with the adverb 'totally' indicating the completeness of this empathy, in effect legitimising their input to the thread. This ability to empathise also positions the allonormative assumption, that asexuality results from trauma (Decker, 2014), as commonplace and a sign that asexuality is poorly understood.

[33] Text speak meaning 'because'.

Of most interest here, however, is the sentence ‘I can’t say things I really think so I have to say what people expect or be silent’. This shows the detrimental impact that being closeted can have in that it prevents the construction of an authentic self (‘things I really think’) and forces the reification of incorrect assumptions, even silencing the individual completely. This is again powerful evidence of the presence of allonormativity as the use of the modal verbs ‘can’t’ and ‘have to’ indicate that this individual feels compelled to act against their will. These factors are presented as the reasons motivating their desire to come out and increase understanding about asexuality, as indicated by the pronoun ‘that’, in turn positioning coming out as a source of relief from these restrictions. Therefore, despite empathising with the OP and sharing their own concerns about coming out, User 7E outlines their belief that coming out could be beneficial to themself and, by extension, to the OP, thereby indicating alignment with an individualistic perspective. This may in turn be interpreted as an attempt to encourage the OP to overcome their fears and misgivings and to consider coming out as a possible means of accessing more freedoms.

In Post 7.6, User 7F responded to a similar thread in which the OP had asked for help with ideas about how to come out to their friends:

> Post 7.6
>
> User 7F – *26/04/21, 4.42AM*
>
> Maybe ask them if they're familiar with the term and then say that it describes you

Directly engaging with the OP’s request for suggestions, User 7F takes on the role of advice-giver in accordance with the positionality principle, adhering to the CoP’s shared endeavour of offering support and guidance. By suggesting that the OP asks about their friends’ familiarity with asexuality, User 7F foregrounds the fact that many allosexual people are not familiar with this concept (as also shown in my analysis of Response 7.23). They therefore indirectly imply that taking a stance of educating their friends may be necessary but position it as a possible means of the OP breaking the ice around the subject.

However, User 7F frames the adoption of this educator role as a suggestion rather than an obligation via the use of the adverb ‘maybe’ which expresses optionality. This approach affords the OP some agency, allowing them to decide whether this is a scenario with which they would be comfortable as opposed to pushing them towards this course of action. User 7F also encourages the OP to personalise their discussion of asexuality, via the second person pronoun ‘you’, something which would potentially prevent the OP from becoming encumbered by the issue described above of feeling as though they have to speak for all asexuals when revealing their own identity. This is again indicative of an individualistic perspective towards coming out.

Where Posts 7.5 and 7.6 utilise empathy and advice-giving to support the respective OPs on their coming out journeys, Posts 7.7 and 7.8 take a more dissuasive approach. These posts were given in response to a thread in which the OP explained that they felt sure they identified as asexual but feared coming out because they were afraid of other peoples’ reactions, particularly in relation to their asexuality potentially being dismissed on account of their young age or sexual inexperience. They closed their post by asking for advice on how to proceed.

> Post 7.7
> User 7G – *18/05/2021, 4.22AM*
> Why do you feel it is necessary to come out? You should only do it if you feel comfortable with it.

> Post 7.8
> User 7H – *18/05/2021, 5.11AM*
> For me, I waited until I was comfortable and confident to come out (round 2). If you aren't feeling those things yet, it's probably best to wait. Don't pressure yourself by what others are doing or telling you to do. Wait until *you* are ready.

User 7G opens their response by using the interrogative ‘Why do you feel it is necessary to come out?’ which, aside from seeking information about the OP’s thought process, also explicitly challenges the idea that coming out is a necessary act in the first place. This resonates with the individualistic versus collectivist framing of other asexual coming out

narratives analysed above in that it asks the OP to consider their own motivations and whether those motivations make coming out a necessity. That User 7G does not wait for a response before offering the advice in their second sentence suggests that the question itself is intended to make the OP reflect upon their situation, and potentially to challenge their own beliefs, rather than to enable User 7G to assess the validity of those beliefs. Even so, their inclusion of the second sentence represents them taking a stance on the OP's situation, albeit abstractly. Although they use the modal verb 'should', which usually implies obligation, this is mitigated by the adverb 'only' so that it instead reads as a dismissal of obligatory coming out in situations where the individual is uncomfortable. This is due to the use of the conjunction 'if', which places a condition upon coming out, namely the pre-requisite of feeling comfortable. Through this response, then, User 7G takes a stance of supporting the OP to find a solution which takes account of their feelings and also indirectly challenges the legitimacy of suggestions that coming out should be obligatory (see, for example, Cooley *et al*., 2012). In doing so, they attend more closely to the OP's wellbeing than to the community's goals of raising awareness but do adhere to the CoP's shared practices of supporting others.

User 7H uses similar word choices to indicate a lack of obligation in coming out, with 'if' again used to place a condition upon when coming out could be suitable and the adjectives 'comfortable and confident' giving a definitive idea of what such suitable conditions could be. They also make repeated use of the verb 'wait' to emphasise the idea that waiting is permissible, which is backed up by their inclusion of a reference to their own personal experiences of waiting, encouraging the OP not to rush into making a decision before they are ready. This is also stressed in the negated imperative phrase 'don't pressure yourself' in relation to other peoples' influence and the second person personal pronoun 'you', which is italicised for additional emphasis, as these features highlight the importance of the OP's agency in making a decision, in turn authorising them to make their own decisions. By drawing upon their own experiences of waiting to come out, then, User 7H adopts the persona of an experienced veteran, in line with the positionality principle, whose knowledge imbues them with the legitimacy to offer advice to someone less experienced and to authenticate their situation.

This section has shown that members of the AVEN CoP strive to offer advice and support to those with questions regarding coming out. This is in keeping with the community's ethos and members frequently draw upon their own experiences, passing on their knowledge and ideas in a practice reminiscent of Wenger's (1998) theory of a communal memory. The discussion has also shown that dominant allonormative ideologies can inhibit asexual people from feeling comfortable with the idea of coming out but that these experiences often contribute to a shared experience of the allosexual world, resulting in empathy and understanding which can facilitate advice giving.

7.2.3 The language and effectiveness of asexual self-disclosure

Having looked at the considerations which individuals must make when deciding whether or not to reveal their asexual identities to others, it is now important to explore the language choices that asexual people have when it comes to revealing this aspect of their identities. The above discussion established that many asexual people find that they need to explain what asexuality is when revealing this as their identity, with some individuals being put off coming out as a result. This section looks in more detail at how individuals address these issues and considers whether or not their solutions impede the success of coming out as asexual. This ties in with the allonormative focus of this chapter in that allonormativity may be seen to constrain the methods that asexual people have to choose from when coming out.

For some individuals, their reluctance to come out using the label 'asexual' stems from its wider political associations, as in the case of the following survey response:

(7.25) I'm not sure if I want to make a political statement by owning that word. I suppose it's a political statement to say one is asexual. I think by now everyone knows I'm not that into sex so.

This individual frames claiming the asexual label as a 'political statement', suggesting that coming out as asexual is a political act as well as one of identity. This implicitly links the label to either activist movements seeking to gain rights and challenge normativities, or otherwise to a more local, personal politics of stating affiliation and difference. Thus, the respondent's uncertainty about associating with these goals or stances, as indicated by the 'verb phrase 'I'm not sure', invokes the distinction ToI to separate themself and their aims from those of these activists or groups. This is presented as a choice via the verb 'owning'

which suggests that the respondent is conscious of their own agency. As a result, we can see that the asexual activist movement which drives others to proclaim their asexuality in the pursuit of greater rights and visibility (see Section 7.2.1) ultimately pushes individuals such as this away from using the label.

Whilst their resistance to the asexual label may be interpreted as a sign that this individual chooses not to come out, it is clear from the third sentence that they have revealed aspects of their asexual experiences to others. The use of the prepositional noun phrase 'by now' serves as evidence of the processual nature of their revelations in that it suggests that these have been ongoing and are now thought to have been completed in this individual's case, as indicated by the use of the pronominal phrase 'everyone knows'. However, in the absence of the asexual label, their revelations only concerned being 'not that into sex'. And yet, the fact that they end the sentence with the conjunction 'so', which is not followed by a connected clause and therefore is an example of elision, leaves the reader to infer that this respondent feels that other peoples' knowledge of their non-interest in sex is a sufficient revealing of their sexuality. This may well reflect the aforementioned findings (see Sections 5.1.1 and 7.2.1) that some asexual people do not view their asexuality as a significant aspect of their identity and thus, declining to name it and instead favouring the revealing of particular feelings or experiences, such as a lack of interest in sex, may constitute another form of control over how their identities are delineated. Thus, although they have chosen not to name their asexuality as an identity to their contacts, it seems clear that the writer of Response (7.25) does not view themself as being closeted because they have been open about their feelings (Jones, 2007, makes similar points about men-who-have-sex-with-men). However, this raises questions about what constitutes a successful coming out and how important naming an identity is to successfully claiming it.

Similar patterns exist in the following forum posts, added to a thread in which an OP asked for details of other users' coming out stories.

> Post 7.9
> User 7I – 09/05/2021, *1.02PM*
> […] I usually do it either more of a hinting at my biromanticism and asexuality ("I like both boys and girls"; "I am not interested in sex"), if I do it in person. For some reason, I so far only texted the words "asexual" and "asexuality". […]

Post 7.10

User 7J – *09/05/2021, 1.21PM*

[Quoting Post 7.9]

Yoooo this is incredibly relatable. I've definitely gone for the, "I'm not interested in sex" a few times because I find it hard to actually just say "asexual" esp. when I I haven't really come to terms with where on the ace spectrum I am. […] I've really just decided to say asexual because I think if I told someone I'm grey-ace[34] I'd actually need to provide some level more of information that I'm willing to share. […]

User 7I's reference to the adverb 'usually' again indicates that they have had multiple coming out experiences and that they have utilised the same tactic for many of them and yet the adverbial phrase 'more of' implies that this is loosely defined. The verb phrase 'hinting at' is key in that it contrasts the more direct alternative of explicitly revealing, setting this individual's coming out practices as more subtle and more obscure. The two phrases that User 7I includes as examples of what they say, 'I like both boys and girls' and 'I am not interested in sex', can both feasibly be used by allosexual individuals as well. Thus, their inclusion here gives the impression that User 7I's coming out experiences could be ambiguous or even opaque, to someone who was not already familiar with the nuances of asexuality, suggesting that asexuality can be culturally unintelligible. Interestingly, however, they also note that they only use this tactic when coming out in person, as indicated by the conjunction 'if' in the phrase 'if I do it in person', and that they have used the labels in text message coming outs. They do not offer an explanation for this and so it is impossible to comment upon their motivations, but this fact does indicate that User 7I adapts their techniques to the different contexts in which they opt to come out which in turn signals their agency in the process and the processual nature of coming out.

In responding to the thread, User 7J quoted Post 7.9. They identify User 7I's message as 'relatable', with this adjective, emphasised by the adverb 'incredibly', invoking the CoP's ethos of sharing experiences and offering solidarity. User 7J strongly aligns themself with User 7I's tactics by way of the adverb 'definitely', whilst also turning the phrase 'I'm not

[34] Shortened form of 'grey asexual'

interested in sex' into a noun phrase, as signalled by the determiner 'the', which lends it a sense of notoriety – perhaps even positioning it as a cliché which is overly common amongst the CoP's coming out vocabulary. They position this as an easier option in comparison to using the term 'asexual', via the use of the adjective 'hard', and therefore suggest that their choices when coming out are designed to make the process more comfortable for themself. This is particularly interesting in light of their comment that they have yet to fully understand their identity, as this suggests that they may not yet have access to the labels which would enable them to describe their identity more accurately.

Also of note is User 7J's decision to use 'asexual' in preference to 'grey-ace'. This is significant because, having already declared this to be a difficult term to use, they reframe their perspective to position it as easier to declare than their actual identity. In this sense, User 7J constructs a spectrum of ease of explaining asexuality and locates their grey-asexual identity towards its pinnacle on account of it creating a 'need' for more detail than they are comfortable declaring. As a result, User 7J positions coming out as asexual as a compromise in their own instance.

These examples are telling when we look to the second of Liang's (1997) three features of coming out which is concerned with a person revealing their sexuality to another and, crucially, depends upon the other person understanding the message that has been communicated and recognising it as a form of disclosure. Where either of these two conditions are not met, Liang suggests that the coming out may be perceived to have failed. This could be deemed true in the cases of Users 7I and 7J who use the 'asexual' and 'grey-ace' labels for their AVEN profiles but avoid doing so when coming out, which indicates a degree of concealing or misrepresenting their identities. However, for User 7I, who appears less keen to express the asexual label at all, the applicability of Liang's assertions are more strained and thus we see that there is potential for asexual coming out experiences to disrupt existing models of coming out which reflect the homosexual experience. This practice of avoiding using the asexual label may relate to asexuality's relative obscurity, and the aforementioned issue of having to explain it, with individuals choosing to describe their sexuality rather than naming it because naming it would lead to it needing to be described anyway. In this sense, then, it is possible that the label is sometimes seen as insufficient and unnecessary when coming out to others and that not naming their asexuality could be a means

of avoiding an unwanted extra step in the process. Thus, we might infer that allonormative culture renders asexuality so poorly understood that it becomes easier not to name it. However, this inevitably further marginalises and erases asexuality and therefore reifies allonormative ideals.

The following anecdotal example of coming out from a forum post features a further illuminating response which is typical of many asexual peoples' experiences of revealing their asexuality.

> Post 7.11
> User 7K – *18/05/2021, 1.11PM*
> […] I went out with some friends and was approached by a guy. I had no clue what to say so I kinda just awkwardly said... "I'm not... interested? Generally?" and then decided that was as good a time as any to drop in the fact that I'm ace to the people I was with. I knew for sure that one of the women I was with wouldn't get it, and unsurprisingly her response was something like, "you just haven't met the right person" and "but you've had sex?". Fun times […]

User 7K creates a strong sense of being caught out and uncomfortable during the encounter, with the phrase 'I had no clue what to say' suggesting a lack of preparedness and the three adverbs 'kinda just awkwardly' modifying the verb 'said' emphasising their discomfort. The use of question marks in the quoted response (which again mirrors the phrasings used in Response (7.25) and by Users 7I and 7J) to the male they encountered also suggest uncertainty which is particularly striking in relation to them subsequently acknowledging their 'ace' identity and declaring it more explicitly to their friends. This could be seen as a sign that their unfamiliarity with the man made them uncertain about explicitly claiming an asexual identity and this contrasts with them revealing their identity to their friends as the verb phrase 'drop in' has casual connotations, suggesting that this revelation was not agonised over. This may, in turn, be interpreted as a sign that User 7K positions themself as being closer to their friends than to the male patron and therefore of feeling more secure in their knowledge of the friends' reactions.

And yet, the female friend's responses are noteworthy as these suggest a misunderstanding of asexuality and non-recognition of User 7K's identity which appears to contradict any feelings of security. It is telling that User 7K notes that they suspected this response prior to coming out, via the verb phrase 'knew for sure' and the following adverb 'unsurprisingly', as this allows User 7K to position the woman as being at odds with themself, invoking the distinction ToI to distance themself from her. In line with Liang's assertions, then, User 7K's attempt at coming out may be deemed to have failed in this case as, although they revealed their sexuality to the woman, her lack of comprehension suggests that she was no closer to understanding User 7K's identity and could therefore not be considered to have correctly recognised the disclosure. This potential to be misunderstood seems particularly strong in the case of asexuals on account of the low levels of awareness of it and the disbelief that many allosexual people have towards the idea that some people may not find sex appealing (Bogaert, 2015).

7.3 Summary

This chapter has shown that asexuality occupies an awkward position in relation to other sexual identities, being unaccommodated by wider allosexual society but also not being fully accepted within LGBTQ+ and queer communities. And yet, many asexual people *do* wish to be included in these categories, feeling an affinity with them on account of shared marginalisation, oppression and minority status. Experiencing rejection from them can therefore have a detrimental impact upon how asexuals categorise their identities, leading many individuals to seek out specifically asexual communities such as AVEN for validation, solidarity and support.

Coming out is also often considered an important aspect of asexual identity making and my analysis has shown that the AVEN CoP offers advice and support to those embarking on this journey. Whilst the act itself is not always deemed essential for asexual people – often because remaining closeted will not impede them living an asexual life and because coming out is therefore perceived as having minimal benefits to them personally – there is still evidence that individuals recognise the benefits that coming out can have for raising awareness of asexuality and enabling feelings of authenticity. However, there is also evidence that worries about having to explain asexuality as part of coming out, and limitations of the

vocabulary that can be used for this purpose, put some individuals off coming out fully or at all. This is clear evidence of the continued prominence of allonormativity, even in moments where asexuals attempt to subvert it.

8 Discussion

In the course of this research, I have used a survey and ethnographic observations to investigate the ways in which members of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) construct their identities in the context of both the community and wider society. My theoretical framework has comprised the community of practice (CoP) model (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) and Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005). Combined, this has allowed me to explore the community's interactions and the impact that the community's ethos and practices have upon how its members conduct and identify themselves. This chapter builds upon my discourse analysis to consider what my findings can tell us about asexual identity-making and what insights the current research can offer to the field of language, gender and sexuality and, more specifically, to CoP theory.

To reiterate, my research has sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1) How is asexuality defined by AVEN's users and what bearing does this have upon how its members see themselves/ their identities?
2) What impact does allonormativity have upon asexual identities?
3) How do individuals negotiate their asexual identities in such a diverse community?
4) What influence does the structure of the AVEN community of practice have upon the identities that members adopt?

Concerned with how asexuality is defined, RQ1 explores how the AVEN community understands and debates the concept of asexuality and how this fundamentally underpins the identity work that takes place within the forums. This includes the discussion and negotiation of identities as well as how members reflect upon their identity work in the so-called 'real world' outside of the forums. Building on the evidence for allonormativity established in Chapters 1 and 2, RQ2 investigates the presence of allonormativity within society and interrogates its significance to the identities that asexual people adopt. Crucially, this links to the issue of defining asexuality, given that it constrains the definitions which are possible. In Section 8.1, below, answers to these two questions are therefore considered in combination to look at the relationship between asexuality and allonormativity, and what this can tell us about asexuality's position within society.

Section 8.2 then looks at the CoP as a theoretical framework, focusing upon the implications of the current research for testing and furthering our understanding of how CoPs operate. RQ3 and RQ4 are therefore of most importance here. RQ3, concerned with the negotiation of identities between AVEN members, tests the applicability of CoP theory in the context of a highly heterogeneous online community, whilst RQ4 considers the structure of the community and the impact this can have upon the identities that members construct. These questions have therefore allowed me to look not only at how relevant CoP theory is for understanding the AVEN community but also at how the features of the AVEN community relate to traditional understandings of CoPs.

In Section 8.3, I reflect upon the methodology used in this study, questioning its efficacy and the impact of issues encountered. Finally, Section 8.4 considers the potential that this study has to spearhead future research on and around asexuality, and identity within sociocultural linguistics.

8.1 Asexuality and its relationship to allonormativity

As a sexuality which is diametrically opposed to the more dominant allosexuality, it is perhaps inevitable that asexual identification is significantly informed by allonormativity. This thesis has shown that this often culminates in asexuality being framed as a deficiency or an abnormality which marginalises and pathologises it, in turn impacting upon how asexual people understand and describe their own identities. This is considered further in Sections 8.1.1 to 8.1.3. However, the very existence of asexuality also represents a challenge to allonormativity (Section 8.1.4). Thus, the disclosure of asexual identities and the formation of asexual communities such as AVEN, which have the ability to confront and undermine allonormative ideals, enable asexuality to be made visible. This is discussed in Section 8.1.2. The interconnected nature of asexuality and allonormativity, then, is an important finding of this study and a topic which has not received sociolinguistic attention to date.

8.1.1 Allonormativity as a marginalising force

As mentioned in Section 2.1.2.3, Carrigan (2012) reported that society's expectations of the presence of sexual desire serve to obscure asexuality from the public consciousness. This thesis has shown that this often manifests in asexuality being erased, which Baker (2008: 150) describes as 'the process by which any facts or behaviour which are inconsistent with [common preconceptions] are ignored or explained away'. This is evidenced by comments in my data which indicate that asexuality is rendered invisible, such as 'I don't see/hear my experience talked about or represented' (Response 7.2), or is poorly understood, as seen in Section 7.2 where individuals report needing to explain what asexuality is when coming out. I also argued in Chapter 1 that even published literature can be guilty of co-opting asexuality as synonymous with celibacy (Fahs, 2010; Hiramoto, 2012; Hiramoto and Pua, 2019) which causes erasure by invalidating claims that asexuality is an inherent aspect of who asexual people are, instead equating it to a choice.

These scenarios lead to asexuality being undermined and pathologised rather than being treated as a distinct and valid sexuality. In this sense, then, the erasure and invisibility of asexuality inauthenticates asexual identities, enabling asexuality to be dismissed as a pathology, a phase or an attempt to seem unique, amongst others (Decker, 2014). Indeed, Decker claims that many of these misconceptions are related to the idea that asexuality can be 'caused' by life experiences and lifestyle choices, and that there is therefore a potential 'fix'. As has been shown by my analyses (Section 7.2), this is in turn problematic because it means that, even when attempts are made to raise awareness of asexuality or to reveal an asexual identity, these may be rejected on unproven or disproven grounds, leading to asexuality remaining obscured and undermined. This was shown particularly clearly in the case of Post 7.11 where an acquaintance was quoted as dismissing User 7K's asexuality by stating 'you just haven't met the right person' and 'but you've had sex?'. In answer to RQ2's focus on the impact of allonormativity on asexual identities, then, my analyses in this thesis have shown that allonormativity can erase and obscure asexuality.

There is similarity here with bisexuality which is also subject to erasure. In his study of bisexual erasure in British and American corpora, for example, Baker (2008) found that words referring to bisexuality were used much less frequently than those referring to homosexuality and heterosexuality. He also identified frequent coupling of bisexuality with

another sexuality (usually homosexuality, as in phrases like ‘gay and bisexual’) which mirrors the coupling of asexuality with ‘ally’ in the LGBTQ+ acronym (as discussed in Section 7.1.1), indicating that inclusion of the terms bisexual and asexual often amount to an afterthought. Similarly, instances in which bisexuality was used or interpreted as a ‘code for gay’ (2008: 150) are reminiscent of beliefs that asexual people are gay but hiding it, or straight but trying to seem quirky or different (Decker, 2014; Purdy, 2015). These points indicate that, like bisexuality, asexuality is subject to erasure and marginalisation and that there is therefore value in including a greater spectrum of minority sexual identities, such as asexuality, in linguistic sexuality studies as they can further illuminate these practices.

As the data analysis in Section 7.1 demonstrates, asexual people also often feel marginalised from everyday society, where many feel that their experiences are more similar to LGBTQ+ individuals than heterosexuals, as indicated by comments such as ‘Our experiences, like those of the LGBTQ+ community, do not fit with the heterosexual norm’ (Response 7.3). This marginalisation has also been shown to be true in relation to LGBTQ+ circles, where, despite similarities of experience, many asexuals feel that their asexuality is not seen as sufficiently LGBTQ+ to warrant inclusion, resulting in exclusion, as suggested by comments such as ‘I've seen such a negative backlash online, of LGBT+ people being vehemently against including asexuals in their community’ (Response 7.6). This, in effect, casts asexuality adrift and I have shown that this situation may lead to despair and giving up on trying to be included, as shown most clearly in the example: ‘I just don't feel the hassle of arguing [with] people in the LGBTQ+ community is worth their acceptance of us’ (Response 7.5). This in turn motivates some individuals to call for asexuality to be viewed as a category in its own right. A notable example is ‘I do not think we should be in a group of those that are expressing their sexuality so diversely when we are the polar opposite. Its like putting the color of black, the color void of all colors, in a rainbow’ (Response 7.9). This highlights a belief that asexuality fits awkwardly within LGBTQ+ or queer categories and corresponds to my own assertions, in Section 2.1.2.1, that definitions of sexuality do not accommodate the presence of asexuality. As a result of these awkward relationships with allonormative society and LGBTQ+ groups, asexual individuals report seeking out specifically asexual communities such as AVEN for solidarity and support (Sections 6.1.1 and 7.1.2). In considering RQ2 again, then, we can see that allonormative ideologies not only exclude asexuality from everyday society and

LGBTQ+ groups but also indirectly encourage the creation of and identification with specifically asexual communities as an alternative source of support and inclusion.

8.1.2 Linguistic erasure

The presence of allosexual norms, however, are not just directed at asexuality from external, allosexual origins. As discussed in Section 2.1.2.3, existing research into asexuality has shown that allosexual norms are often internalised by asexual people and that this consequently leads to asexuality being framed in a negative light from within asexual communities too (Przybylo, 2012; Chasin, 2013; Flore, 2014). In focusing upon the linguistic features of definitions of asexuality given by my participants in Chapter 5, this thesis has sought to explore these ideas further and to offer insights into how the language used by asexual people to define and describe their experiences is influenced by allonormativity. To this end, I have found that allosexual concepts such as ‘sexual attraction’, ‘sexual desire’ and ‘sex drive/ libido’ feature prominently within their definitions (Section 5.1.1) and that negation is used routinely to distinguish between these allosexual experiences and their applicability to asexuality (Section 5.1.2). Asexuality is also frequently framed as ‘innate’ or ‘inherent’ which simultaneously aligns it with other sexualities whilst distinguishing it from celibacy, a chosen behaviour (Responses 5.5 to 5.7). The use of allosexual concepts and references to innateness have been shown to create a familiar frame of reference for asexuality, that puts it on par with other sexualities (an example of Bucholtz and Hall’s, 2004a, 2005, tactic of adequation) and therefore makes it intelligible as a sexual identity. And yet, the use of negation marks asexuality as non-normative, invoking a relationship of subservience to allosexuality.

This is particularly important when we consider that the use of allosexual concepts to describe asexuality has been shown to be problematic because some asexual people struggle to understand the terminology that they use, as in the case of User 5H who uses the term ‘aromantic’ to describe themself despite not fully comprehending the concept of romantic attraction. This, too, I argued, could be an example of asexual people attempting to adequate their experiences with those of allosexuals. Yet the fact that asexual people feel the need to describe these experiences at all, when some do not feel that these experiences represent a significant aspect of their day-to-day existence (Responses 5.20 to 5.23), tells us that

allonormativity can be so pervasive as to take precedence over their own understandings of their asexuality, forcing it to become a significant part of their identities when it might otherwise feel unimportant. This idea is supported by Bogaert's (2015: 93) claim,

> That many asexual people still want, or are compelled, to forge a sexual identity (i.e., as an asexual) attests to the relevance and power of sex in our society. [...] It is as if these asexuals know that, on some very deep level, sex really matters in society, and therefore their own identities must also be defined by it, even if that identification takes on meaning because it is the polar opposite of sex.

For some individuals, then, identification with asexuality is beholden to allonormative ideals because allonormativity makes their asexuality meaningful. Thus Bucholtz and Hall's positionality principle (2005), which posits that identities are formed in relation to 'macro-level demographic categories', has been shown to be particularly pertinent to understanding that asexuality occupies a marginalised position within the allosexual world.

As an example of this principle in action, I have shown that allonormativity leads to asexuality being defined using linguistic features which limit the ways in which asexual people can express their sexual identities, forcing them to be sexually focused even where this does not feel relevant to them. In doing so, asexual people must position their own identities in relation to more dominant allonormative practices, thereby accepting and reinforcing a relationship in which asexuality is positioned as a deviant 'other'. These practices have therefore been shown to perpetuate allonormative ideals which marginalise and pathologise asexuality. This mirrors findings discussed in Section 2.1.2.3 that heteronormativity can influence how homosexuality is conceived (for example, Bogetić, 2009; Milani, 2013) and relates to queer linguistic arguments that coming out reproduces heteronormativity (discussed in Motschenbacher, 2020).

In answer to the first part of RQ1, then – namely, how is asexuality defined – this research has found that asexuality is defined in negated sexual terms which enables it to be distinguished from celibacy and equated to other sexual identities. However, the result of this framing is that asexuality becomes meaningful because of its relationship to allonormativity, which marginalises asexuality and promotes the dominance of allonormativity. This can ultimately lead asexual people to feel as though they are deficient and marginalised in

comparison to the more dominant allosexual population. This is also relevant to RQ2, which asks about the impact of allonormativity on asexual identities, in that the pervasive nature of allonormative ideals necessitates this framing and makes it inescapable. Relating this to Flore's (2014: 29) call for asexuality to be made 'intelligible without referencing sexuality', I argue that this would be difficult to achieve in practice because a lack of interest in sexual activities only becomes relevant as an identity because of society's insistence that sexuality is important. As a result, it is my conclusion that it is necessary to describe asexuality in negated sexual terms in order to separate asexual experiences from the common allosexual practices in which asexual individuals have no interest in partaking. This is important because the presence of sexual attraction and desire are so widely assumed that *not* distancing asexuality from them would ultimately lead to such assumptions continuing; this could, in turn, be said to prevent authenticity because it would lead to their actual sexual feelings – or lack of them – being obscured. Adopting asexual identities which are positioned in relation to allosexuality, then, may therefore be seen to represent a rejection of the dominant ideology rather than a deferral to it.

These points indicate that allonormativity leads to the suppression of the ways that asexuality can be described, enforcing the need for it to be framed sexually and as a non-normative, even deviant, behaviour. The pervasive nature of this ideology has been shown to create feelings of uncertainty amongst asexuals whereby they question their experiences and lack of attraction as symbols of illness, as in the case of Response 5.41's reference to going on a 'self-diagnosis tour', or abnormality, as in Response 5.42's comment about researching 'what was wrong with me'. The current study has considered how attempts to find labels and to reveal asexual identities can help asexual people to take back control of their identities. Nevertheless, it has also been shown that allonormativity can impact these processes too, as shall be discussed in the following section.

8.1.3 Coming out as asexual

Fine characterises asexuals as a 'group of people who are tasked with confronting and subverting hetero- and allonormative assumptions in order to justify their very existence' (2019: 25). Part of this concerns coming out to the self (Liang, 1997), where an individual explores their sexual feelings and comes to accept a sexual identity, often via claiming labels

which they feel describe their experiences. This is a common rite of passage for sexual minorities, enabling them to associate with a wider community and to come to a better understanding of who they are. Yet Schudson and van Anders (2019: 363) refer to this process as 'fulfilling the normative expectation to find a 'proper label'' and, in so doing, they highlight this practice as a perpetuation of normativity. Thus, even when attempting to find a label which distinguishes themselves from allosexuality, asexual people inevitably end up conforming to allonormative expectations of having a label which relates to sexuality. In terms of coming out to the self, then, this may also prevent individuals from developing insight into their personal feelings, making it so that they have to see themselves in sexual terms. This may be particularly true when asexuality is framed as being a lack of sexuality, with all the negative implications that 'lack' entails (Section 5.1.2). This again resonates with the paradoxical situation outlined above: asexual people are unable to escape allonormative ideals because these create the conditions in which asexual people wish to distinguish themselves from allosexuality, yet in so doing, they must conform to the pressures of a society which insists upon making sexuality relevant and prominent.

Where exploring experiences and claiming labels facilitates coming out to the self – particularly in relation to an allonormative society where access to these labels and the freedom to express these experiences can be limited (see, for example, the discussion of AVEN as a source of support for encountering labels and discussing experiences, Section 6.1.1) – coming out to others can also be an important aspect of asexual identity making. My research has shown that coming out to others is seen to offer asexual people opportunities to disclose their own asexuality and to therefore raise awareness of asexuality more widely (Section 7.2.1). And yet, allonormativity can constrain the ways in which asexual people can come out; these issues cause some asexual people to feel anxious about the possibility of misunderstandings and facing difficulties with making asexuality comprehensible, as shown in Section 7.2. As a result of this, we have seen that some asexual people choose not to use their full choice of identity labels when coming out (Posts 7.11 and 7.12), or otherwise avoid coming out at all (Responses 7.21 to 7.24). In answer to RQ2, which is concerned with the impact of allonormativity, then, this shows that allonormativity can lead to asexual people's coming out being perceived inaccurately – and can consequently prevent increasing visibility of asexuality.

This is notable because, in Section 5.2, I showed that a significant majority of my survey participants believe that delineating between sexual and romantic attraction is important. Many also believed that the multitude of identity terms which arise from this distinction are positive as they can reassure individuals that their experiences are valid and can enable precision and clarity when describing an asexual identity. In this sense, labels are seen to offer comfort to people, particularly those who had previously encountered difficulties with understanding experiences because they 'don't see/hear my experience talked about or represented, which is isolating' (Response 7.2), and therefore labels help them to ground themselves within an established identity and community group. Thus, as argued in Section 5.2, labelling may be considered a linguistic act which helps to bring an asexual identity into being, in correspondence with Bucholtz and Halls' (2005) emergence principle.

Some of the data analysed in this thesis contradicts this idea – for example, User 5I's comment that 'You don't need a label to accept yourself', which could be seen to represent a symbol of resistance to allonormativity in that it does not fulfil the 'normative expectation to find a 'proper label'' (Schudson and van Anders', 2019: 363). Nevertheless, comments such as 'logging on to aven shows me that I am not alone and that it is a real thing' and 'I keep coming back because it normalizes my experiences' (both from Section 6.1.1) make it clear that many of AVEN's asexuals do feel that the process of finding and identifying with asexuality and the AVEN community is helpful. As a result, the scenario in which individuals feel overwhelmed by the potential barriers to coming out – and therefore choose not to do so or not to use their chosen labels – offers a telling insight into the detrimental impact which allonormativity can have upon coming out as asexual.

One aspect of this concerns problems associated with the proliferation of labels within the asexual community. Researchers such as Szuba (2018) have observed that excessive terminology can complicate discussions of asexuality and prevent consensus. This is particularly relevant in the context of allonormative society in that the nuances of terms used extensively within the AVEN community may be obscure to those outside of it and may therefore impede rather than facilitate communication about asexuality. Indeed, in Section 7.2.3, I showed that this may contribute to the difficulties that some asexual people anticipate when it comes to coming out, as they fear needing to explain terms which are unfamiliar to their interlocutors. This was shown most clearly in Post 7.12: 'I've really just decided to say

asexual because I think if I told someone I'm grey-ace I'd actually need to provide some level more of information that I'm willing to share'. Individuals may therefore choose not to use their chosen labels when coming out, to make the process easier or to remove issues which may arise from rejection or disbelief.

This is key because clarity of expression is important to achieving a successful disclosure (as suggested by Liang, 1997; discussed in Section 7.2) and so the avoidance of terms which enable precision and accuracy may therefore be seen to prevent a successful disclosure. This is particularly true in cases where, for the sake of convenience or saving face, individuals opt to come out using different labels to those which they identify with, such as Users 7I and 7J. This limits their ability to express their true feelings and understandings of their sexual identities, as they ultimately compromise by coming out as an identity which is more commonly understood and less likely to require extensive explanation. In essence, then, such individuals may not be considered to have come out authentically which may therefore mean that, in Liang's terms, their coming out experiences cannot be deemed successful. It is also relevant, here, to return to the aforementioned idea that asexuality can only be described in sexual terms, as this too may be said to prevent a successful coming out, both to the self and to others. This is because describing their experiences in these terms may be said to prevent asexual people from describing the truth of their experiences – and the aspects of their connections with others which they themselves deem to be significant – and therefore prevents authenticity. Thus, in answer to RQ2, we see that allonormativity not only shapes the identities that it is possible for asexuals to claim but that it can also constrain them.

The inability to share labelled identities with others may therefore lead to a symbolic loss of those identities which can result in feelings of inauthenticity and marginalisation. This is especially pertinent when we consider that the main purpose of coming out is to characterise a person's claimed identity and to show others who a person believes themself to be. Allonormativity therefore creates a scenario in which asexuals are forced to adopt a sexual identity and to come out in order to be authentic, whilst simultaneously preventing this from happening successfully. This may be said to create a paradox in which asexuality is perpetually at the mercy of allonormativity; this provides a further answer to RQ2 by showing that allonormativity has the effect of rendering asexuality and asexual people as passive recipients of its power.

All of these factors show that allonormativity has a great deal of influence over asexual identities. However, this thesis has also found that asexuality can challenge allonormativity, as considered in the next section.

8.1.4 AVEN's role in challenging allonormativity

With individuals such as the writer of Response (7.25) stating 'I suppose it's a political statement to say one is asexual', it is clear that the very existence of asexuality has the potential to challenge and destabilise allonormative ideals. This section therefore explores this potential as it relates to issues of visibility and empowerment.

The act of coming out is fundamental to this idea of challenging allonormativity. As already discussed in Sections 7.2.1 and 8.1.3, coming out offers asexual people chances to make asexuality more visible, both in terms of their own, personal identities and also as a more general, collective identity. This was shown by examples such as 'I felt that I couldn't be myself if people didn't know this about me' (Respondent 7.17) and 'I'm coming out in order to improve society's acceptance one person at a time' (Respondent 7.20). Considering that asexuality is ordinarily marginalised in relation to allosexuality, the practice of declaring an asexual identity inevitably draws attention to it, introducing the concept to others. In this sense, as Liang (1997) states, coming out 'not only describes a state of affairs […] but also brings those affairs […] into being'. Thus, this process evokes the emergence principle of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), making asexuality manifest such that it needs to be acknowledged. Whilst the dominant ideologies of allonormativity have been shown to necessitate and hinder this process and to sometimes make it unsuccessful, the act of coming out as asexual unbalances allosexuality as a taken-for-granted state of being by confronting it with an alternative reality. This in turn challenges allonormativity's positioning as a stable and totemic entity, forcing room to be made for asexuality alongside it. This therefore serves to counter the arguments given above in response to RQ2 in that it shows that asexuality and allonormativity have a reciprocal relationship in which both concepts have the potential to influence each other, making them mutually constitutive.

Whilst a discussion of the structure and functioning of the CoP, and its effectiveness as a theoretical framework in this research, follows in Section 8.2, it is also important to consider the AVEN CoP here in terms of its influence on enabling asexuality to challenge allonormativity. This is because the ethos of the AVEN CoP leads to it validating asexual experiences and identities; this is significant to the CoP members who feel marginalised and pathologised away from the forums because even if these accepting perspectives do not translate well beyond the community's boundaries, they do create a place of safety and acceptance within them. This has been evidenced by examples such as 'I have used AVEN to reassure myself' (Response 6.1) and 'logging on to aven shows me that I am not alone and that it is a real thing' (Response 6.2), as well as the description of AVEN as 'a place [w]here I don't need to be on the lookout for sexual advances/ expectations. A safe space, in other words' (Response 7.12). As such, this validation undermines the prominence and power of allonormativity, promoting alternative views such that the CoP's members may come to recognise them as equally valid and non-problematic. Thus, the AVEN CoP has been shown to have an important role to play in normalising asexuality, as indicated most explicitly in Response (6.3): 'I keep coming back because it normalizes my experiences' and this in turn supports my interpretation of AVEN as a CoP and not just an affinity space (Gee, 2005b) as members seek out and value the space as a place of belonging and connection.

These details therefore provide answers to RQs 2, 3 and 4. For example, RQ2 asks about the impact of allonormativity on asexual identities and RQ3 asks about how identities are negotiated between community members. The above observations show that the safe space offered by AVEN allows individuals to construct their asexual identities in an environment where asexual identities are dominant. This means that these identities can be created in relation to other asexual identities rather than in relation to allosexual identities, allowing asexuality to be self-constituting in this context, mirroring Leap's (2011) observations of one type of gay culture being used as a baseline for another instead of heteronormativity. Whilst this is not totally possible in the context of AVEN – given that allonormativity has been shown to influence the very language that is used to describe asexuality – my analyses have indicated that individuals are at least able to reconfigure their understandings of their asexual identities as normal and positive aspects of their lives. Thus, the safe space that AVEN provides is also a productive environment for the creation of asexual identities away from allonormativity and is also a site for the negotiation of asexual meaning without discussions

being usurped by allonormative topics. Finally, in answer to RQ4, which asks about the influence of the CoP's structure on identities, these details show that the supportive community ethos is fundamental to many asexual people accepting and embracing their identities.

The community's support and validation can, in turn, empower asexual individuals to come out, to educate others about asexuality and to become activists because the supportive conditions help them to feel valued and included, whereas they might not have felt this way away from the forums. This may foster a desire to engage with the CoP's aim of raising awareness (for example, Response 7.20), even where this was not an original reason for joining the forums, by creating a sense of unity and connectedness which may inspire collective action. This corresponds to Anderson's (2016 [1983]) concept of imagined communities (discussed further in Section 2.3) – that is, communities in which the members do not all know each other yet feel connected by a particular shared aspect of their existence, such as location or, in the context of AVEN, asexuality. Of particular importance here is the aspect which suggests that differences may be overlooked by a belief in a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (ibid: 7). This relates to the AVEN context in terms of individuals feeling connected by their shared asexuality and adequating their varied lived experiences in order to create a collective identity which, by a process of strategic essentialism, can then be used beyond the forums to educate about and raise awareness of asexuality in a cohesive way. In this sense, then, the community strives towards a collective identity which considers different views of asexuality whilst also compromising in order to make it intelligible to the outside world. Here again we see evidence of AVEN being more than an affinity space (Gee, 2005b) to many members of the community.

8.1.5 Summary

This section has argued that the concept of allonormativity is an important focus for sexuality studies, showing that it is pervasive within society and a potent force in shaping asexual identity making. The data elicited from the AVEN forums and its members' survey responses indicate that allonormativity is an issue which must continually be negotiated and that it is inescapable in modern societies. This research has therefore shown that it is highly prominent and yet it has, as yet, been under-represented within language and sexuality studies and queer

linguistics (Fine, 2019, is an exception). I would argue, therefore, that there is value in considering allonormativity within discussions of normativity in queer linguistic research going forwards, not only where asexuality is concerned but also in relation to other sexual identities; the prominence of allonormativity must surely mean that these identities are also subject to its influence. Including allonormativity in such research would help to expand upon this thesis, further challenging allonormativity as a taken-for-granted set of expectations, much as the inclusion of heterosexuality in sociolinguistic studies of sexuality has helped to show heterosexuality to be equally as socially constructed as homosexuality (see Section 2.1.2.2).

Furthermore, as asexuality is diametrically opposed to allosexuality, a greater focus upon allosexuality and allonormativity within linguistics would inevitably help to make asexuality more visible and to queer allonormative dominance. This would, in turn, facilitate asexual communities in their efforts to raise awareness of asexuality, and would enable research to shed light upon the nuances of this as yet poorly understood sexual identity. It would also help to expand the current scope of linguistic sexuality research, ultimately broadening what the discipline can tell us about sexuality more generally. This mirrors Bogaert's (2015: 8) assertion that 'The study of asexuality offers a unique opportunity to view sexuality through a new lens', meaning that the study of asexuality has the potential to illuminate far more than just the experiences of a minority sexual group. Rather, its study can also shed light upon the experiences of the sexual majority, making it relevant to all.

8.2 Understanding the AVEN community with the CoP model

As outlined in Section 2.3.1, the CoP model offers a means of exploring communities which pays close attention to the ways in which community members engage with one another and negotiate both individual and collective identities. It is a model concerned with the concept of learning, specifically in relation to how community members are educated in the community's ways and how those members in turn influence those practices going forwards. In this thesis, I have utilised this model to illuminate the ways in which AVEN's members engage with one another. I have shown that issues of tolerance, adaptability and negotiation form important foci for understanding how the community educates its members in both asexuality and acceptable community practices, and how the ever-changing membership tests

and furthers the community's ethos. Although predominantly employed to analyse face-to-face communities, I have argued (in line with King, 2019; Thomas, 2005; Waldron, 2009) that existing CoP theory also speaks to the features of online communities. The following section considers the ways in which the AVEN community conforms to present understandings of CoPs, as well as the ways in which it challenges them.

8.2.1 Shared practices in the AVEN CoP

One key aspect of CoPs is the shared repertoire of practices which members employ in the course of their engagements (Wenger, 1998; Section 2.3.1) and my research has identified a number of such shared practices within the AVEN CoP which guide and influence the interactions in which its members participate. A particularly important practice relates to the community's goal of education in that users attempt to resolve each other's issues by using their own knowledge and experience to answer each other's queries. This was shown particularly well in Section 7.2.2 where users offered advice on coming out and my analysis there showed that adopting temporary roles as advice givers allowed these users to continue the community's aims of supporting members who express uncertainty about their identities. As part of this practice, another practice emerged as pertinent – namely the use of candid advice in the face of difficult conversations. This was particularly notable in the comment 'I mean this gently, [OP's username], but the only way of successfully resolving this situation will involve doing something that you don't want to do right now' (Post 6.1). Whilst this practice may seem, at first, to be confrontational, in Section 6.1.1, I showed that it allows members to prioritise their shared goal of educating others and addressing issues.

Although offering advice is encouraged, users are dissuaded from being overly authoritative, particularly when it comes to prescribing labels to others. Thus, a practice of suggesting but not prescribing is evidently followed by users such as 5C in the comment 'Of course, it's up to you to decide in the end' (Post 5.3) and 6B in 'You're of course not obligated to use that label though' (Post 6.2). This practice therefore allows users to offer pertinent information and guidance to other users about their identities but simultaneously prevents them from doing so over-zealously, enabling individuals seeking advice to self-identify and retain autonomy. This in turn prevents the AVEN community from becoming authoritative and prescriptive.

Another common practice concerns respecting one another's perspectives (as evidenced in Posts 6.9 – 6.11 where Users G and H discuss differing views on a meme) which is vital in a community in which contentious issues are discussed. This is because tolerance facilitates the discussions and helps to prevent invalidation and denaturalisation, promoting a culture of inclusion. Related to this, another practice – avoiding causing offence – has been shown to be so important to the community that moderators will challenge vocabulary choices in order to maintain harmony (as in the case of Users 6E and 6F, both moderators, correcting User 6D's use of 'hermaphrodite' in Posts 6.5 – 6.8). As discussed in Section 6.1.1, such interactions could be interpreted as alienating because they challenge the user's knowledge and potentially invalidate their involvement but, ultimately, they succeed in creating a culture in which individuals can feel safe in their identities and protected from both accidental and deliberate offence.

Given the focus of these practices upon supporting other users and maintaining a tolerant and inclusive community, it follows that another community practice concerns members achieving status via contributing to others' experiences. This is formalised in the organisation's policy of excluding content from purely social sub-forums from contributing to user post counts (discussed in Section 4.1) and users also demonstrate awareness of the importance of contributing to eachother's experience and learning, as in the comment 'to help other people answer theirs' (Response 6.4). This therefore shows that educating and supporting AVEN's members is a priority for both the organisation and the CoP, in turn representing a shared endeavour. It is also suggestive of the argument that CoPs may consist of 'differential levels of status' (Moore, 2006: 612) as it indicates that AVEN does not operate as a purely top-down hierarchy – rather, members can gain legitimacy and status by engaging in the CoP's practices.

Whilst the above named practices evidently have serious reasoning behind their usage, it is also clear from my data that users are keen to create an informal and welcoming atmosphere within the forums; the practice of greeting new users with images of cake helps to achieve this, whilst also indexing asexuality. This is because it references the inside joke that asexuals like cake more than sex (as discussed in relation to Response 7.15) and so represents an acceptance of new users and an invitation to participate further within the community.

Although I have not analysed examples of this practice in action, the fact that individuals reference it as a part of the forums which they look forward to implies that it is a notable, even commonplace, aspect of the culture of the forums. This speaks to AVEN's willingness to be open to outsiders and to welcome new people in.

These findings therefore answer RQ3, which asks how individuals negotiate their identities in a diverse community, in that they show that respect and tolerance towards others underpin the identity negotiations which are undertaken within the CoP. They also provide answers to RQ4, about the influence of the AVEN CoP on how individuals identify, in that they show that the forum's rules for engagement – both explicit and unwritten – guide members towards fulfilling AVEN's endeavours in a fair and tolerant manner and that this can, in turn, alter their identities and statuses within the community.

8.2.1.1 Tactics of intersubjectivity

Key to these shared practices is a widespread use of the ToIs (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2005; discussed in Section 2.2) which are used as CoP practices in AVEN for the purposes of defending and negotiating identities. These enable and constrain the interactions in which AVEN's membership engage. Chief amongst these is the use of adequation, through which users create a sense of solidarity by emphasising the similarity of their experiences. This has been shown to be an important means of generating community cohesion (also mentioned above in Section 8.1), a crucial tool when it comes to pushing for rights and visibility because it helps the community to see itself as connected and to support one another in times of adversity. This widespread presence of adequation is made all the more important in relation to the reverse tactic of distinction, through which AVEN's users distinguish their experiences from those of allosexuals, in a general sense (as in the definitions given in Section 5.1), and from LGBTQ+ people more specifically (as indicated in comments such as 'I do not think we should be in a group of those that are expressing their sexuality so diversely when we are the polar opposite' as in Response 7.9). Whilst this enables them to position asexuality as a distinct sexual identity, it also serves to create a sense of asexuality being marginalised, profoundly separated from other sexual identities and therefore isolated in its pursuit of visibility and acceptance. Both of these tactics again indicate the importance of asexuality's inextricable relationship with allosexuality and allonormativity as they show that asexual

identities are framed in relation to these dominant concepts. This is therefore relevant to RQ2, which asks about the impact of allonormativity on asexual identities, and RQ3, which asks how diverse asexual identities are negotiated within the AVEN community.

My research has also shown that the distinction tactic is relevant to contrasts drawn between asexual sub-categories within the AVEN CoP, and that this has associated implications for community cohesion. These differences can be adequated, with the AVEN organisation seeking to embrace all asexual spectrum identities and any users from outside the spectrum who wish to participate constructively in the community. Similarly, many users display acceptance towards other identities, as exemplified by the framing of definitions to be inclusive of both a total and partial lack of attraction, as discussed in Section 5.1.2, and User 6A who adequated their asexual identity with the OP's allosexual identity in order to support them). However, this thesis has also provided evidence of tensions created by the diversity of AVEN's membership. For example, the disagreement between Users 6I and 6J in Posts 6.12 and 6.14 where User 6I distinguished between User 6J's use of 'five increasingly specific labels' and 'asexuals like me' who they perceived as not having a specific label of their own. This exchange showed that some AVEN members delineate between different subcategories of asexuality and view their differences as incompatible. This idea is also supported by comments such as 'I also notice that the lgbtq+ don't want the hetero-romantic to be in the community' (Response 7.8). This shows that the heterogeneous nature of the AVEN community means that some subsections of the community are seen to complicate the possibility of asexuality being included by LGBTQ+ groups. In answering RQ3's focus on how diverse identities are negotiated within AVEN, then, this shows that some asexual identities are seen as a challenge to others, potentially invalidating them and leaving individuals feeling alienated or side-lined. This may be said to represent a degree of inflexibility in some aspects of AVEN practice which correlates with the view that CoP's can be conflictual and may not meet the needs of all of their members (Bucholtz, 1999; Moore, 2006).Similarly, in answer to RQ4 about the influence of the structure of the community on asexual identities, the diversity of the community means that there is a lack of consensus within it. Whilst this increases the potential for discussion and debate, providing a greater variety of views which can be shared, it has also been shown to spawn disagreements which, for some users, are insurmountable. These points therefore indicate that whilst diversity within the AVEN CoP helps it to be inclusive, it can also prevent the community from being

completely cohesive. This can, in turn, impact upon the image of asexuality that is presented to the allosexual world. As discussed in Section 7.1.1, this can result in asexuality being negatively received and further marginalised by LGBTQ+ groups and wider society.

Related to the issues of distinction within the AVEN community, my research has found that the tactic of denaturalisation occurs sparingly within my data. For example, it is used to indicate that chosen abstinence from sexual acts does not correspond to definitions of asexuality framed around an absence of innate desire (Responses 5.36 – 5.38), thereby highlighting asexuality as distinct from celibacy. It is also alluded to by individuals who feel that asexuality is rejected from LGBTQ+ groups on the grounds of it not being LGBTQ+ enough (as discussed in Section 7.1.1), as well as by individuals who experience, or fear experiencing, rejection of their identities when coming out (Section 7.2.1). Thus, we have seen that denaturalisation can be used beneficially by the community to bolster asexuality as an identity distinct from celibacy but that it may also be used harmfully by those outside of the community to reject or marginalise asexuality and asexual identities.

I have also shown evidence of denaturalisation being used in intracommunity interactions although this was not a common practice, perhaps in keeping with the CoP's aims of being supportive and inclusive. Where it was used, it served the purpose of challenging and undermining individual users. For example, in my analysis of Posts 6.5 to 6.8, I suggested that the moderators who challenged User 6D's use of 'hermaphrodite' could also have been interpreted as challenging their community membership because it highlighted their unfamiliarity with the forum's rules. This was also apparent in the contributions made by Users 6I, 6J and 6K in Posts 6.12 to 6.19 during a disagreement about labels. In this case, we saw that denaturalising another user's identity helped each user to assert their own authenticity in order to gain the upper hand. The issue of non-compliance with forum rules were integral to these examples which speaks to the importance that is placed upon adhering to these rules within the CoP: expectations for engagement with other users are clear and non-adherence is viewed negatively. Whilst this suggests a degree of non-flexibility within the AVEN CoP, challenging notions that the CoP model adapts to its changing membership (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), it could also be a sign that AVEN operates as an affinity space as well as a CoP with different users experiencing it in different ways. In the case of AVEN, it seems that its founding principles of tolerance and creating a safe space are

non-negotiable features of the community. It is therefore clear that we must examine each CoP carefully to understand these processes, rather than attempt to apply a 'one size fits all' theory to them, as argued convincingly in Moore (2006).

The tactic of illegitimation works in a similar way to denaturalisation, withholding validation from groups and individuals. In my own data, this tactic was shown to be present in some definitions of asexuality where it serves to deny legitimacy to particular subcategories via choices of phrasing. This was shown most clearly in Post 5.2 where User 5B explained that the use of 'desire' would lead to cupiosexuality being classified as an allosexual subtype whilst use of 'attraction' would lead to it being classified as a type of asexuality. Thus, the choice of phrasing that is used to define asexuality has the potential to illegitimise and disempower some identities. Illegitimation was also drawn upon in reference to attitudes towards asexuality from LGBTQ+ groups, with a number of users indicating that asexuality may not be recognised as sufficiently queer to be included (Section 7.1.1). These examples therefore show that the illegitimation of asexual identities occurs both towards the community and within it which in turn suggests that elements of the community may not always be inclusive.

Despite the evidence of denaturalisation and illegitimation within AVEN, and the negative implications that these tactics may have for community cohesion and inclusivity, I have found the tactic of authentication to be more common within my dataset. This suggests that AVEN is largely successful in its aims of being inclusive and offering support; the tactic of authentication has been shown to allow CoP members to validate and support one another in coming to an asexual identity and sharing their experiences (see, for example, Sections 6.1.1 and 7.1.2), inviting them into the community and making it clear that their experiences are normal. This is particularly valuable when so much of society dismisses or rejects asexuality as, for some users, these interactions on AVEN may be their first experience of acceptance towards their asexuality. This therefore provides answers to RQ2, about the influence of allonormativity, in that allonormativity causes alienation of asexual people. It also addresses RQ4, about the influence of the structure of the CoP, in that the inherent support and validation shown within the AVEN CoP helps to undo the negative implications of this allonormative influence and to instead aid asexual people to come to an asexual identity.

Similar to authentication, the tactic of authorisation is concerned with granting power to individuals and this thesis has shown that this occurs in two main ways. Firstly, my analysis has shown that users may authorise themselves to give advice and information by appealing to their own legitimacy during discussions, utilising the tactic of authorisation to present themselves as having the relevant knowledge to answer queries and provide support. This practice is evidenced in Post 7.8, where User 7H writes, 'For me, I waited until I was comfortable and confident to come out'. In referencing their own coming out experiences, they position themself as knowledgeable and therefore authorise themself with the legitimacy to advise other users about how best to approach coming out in their own lives. It was also observed in Post 6.9 where User 6G laid claim to an identity as an asexual person with a libido in order to dismiss the accuracy of a meme about asexual libidos.

Secondly, authorisation is an important tactic when it comes to conferring to others the legitimacy to use particular labels and to identify as asexual. Although the AVEN organisation states that they encourage individuals to use labels for as long as they feel relevant, it is clear that some individuals encountering new labels may feel unsure about adopting them to describe their own experiences. It is therefore common for individuals, particularly new users, to ask whether using particular labels is appropriate and, although AVEN does not permit users to tell each other how they should identify, it is nevertheless an important rite of passage for these new users to have their labels and experiences supported by more knowledgeable individuals. This was shown in examples such as Post 6.2 by User 6B whose comment 'It's totally possible to get excited or aroused by sexual things without wanting sex for yourself' sought to reassure the OP that their experiences of arousal did not invalidate their use of the asexual label, in turn authenticating their identity and authorising their use of 'asexual'.

8.2.2 What can AVEN tell us about CoP theory?

Concerned with the authority that members of a community have to enact changes within the group and to move between membership categories, the concept of legitimacy is arguably one of the most important features of CoP membership identified by existing literature (Wenger, 1998; Davies, 2005) and I have also shown it to be key to engagements within the AVEN CoP.

The CoP literature states that members of a CoP, especially newcomers, can influence CoP practices by way of brokering (Wenger, 1998), adapting the ethos of the community to accommodate its changing membership and ideals. However, legitimacy is key to this because it enables individuals to not just have access to the practices at the heart of the community but also to 'sit at the table' at which those practices are 'continually negotiated' (Eckert and Wenger, 2005: 583). My research with AVEN has shown this to be true in some circumstances, such as in the case of the definition debate where a variety of views are allowed to exist alongside one another, with members not only able but also encouraged to discuss their views. This was shown throughout Section 5.1 where definitions which contradict AVEN's official definition were prominent and members were free to discuss them without fear of reprisals from the AVEN organisation. There was also evidence of this in the exchange between Users 6B and 6C in Posts 6.2 to 6.4 about autocorissexuality. With both users being relatively new to the forums, the fact that they were able to discuss the term, negotiating its meaning, and to suggest it to another user to describe their identity indicates that the AVEN CoP does permit newer users to contribute to the negotiation of meaning and practices within the forums.

In this sense, it is clear that newcomers to AVEN gain access to practices, and also have the ability to contribute to discussions which can result in changing practices, without needing their participation to be pre-approved, and thus legitimised, by the CoP. This is a quirk of online CoPs where minimal restrictions on who can join the community, as a result of limited gatekeeping and the online platform not being restricted by space or resources as offline spaces may be (Davies, 2005), leads to far larger memberships than in offline CoPs. This means that members may enter and circulate within the community without coming to the attention of those further up the community's hierarchy. Large online CoPs such as AVEN therefore contradict Davies' (2005: 567) assertion that 'gaining legitimacy is prior to gaining access to practice'. Thus, this thesis supports the assertions of Moore (2006, 2009), Eckert and Wenger (2005) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) that CoPs do not necessarily operate under a top-down hierarchy. In answer to RQ4's focus on the impact of the structure of AVEN upon identities, these details therefore show that the large scale of the AVEN community helps it to offer a valuable resource to those who need it without being restricted by issues of space and distance. This enables it to reach and support an audience far bigger

than face-to-face CoPs and subsequently facilitates the organisation in delivering upon its aims of helping individuals to gain information and adopt asexual identities. Further, the structure of the CoP, in which users do not first need to attain legitimacy in order to participate, enables free discussions of topics with a multitude of views being brought to the fore because they are not held back until a time when the individual has gained legitimacy.

My research has also shown that those users who do not conform to the CoP's standards for behaviour may have their legitimacy challenged. This was evidenced particularly strongly in my analysis of the debate about labels in Posts 6.12 to 6.19, where users whose behaviour was perceived as antagonistic or similar to trolling experienced illegitimation, and also in the thread analysed in Section 6.2 where users questioned the OP's repeated postings on the same topic and the admods subsequently warned those users against diagnosing the OP with illnesses. Whilst some such examples were resolved by users amending their behaviour to be more compliant (such as the users discussed in Section 6.2 ceasing posting on the topic and, in the case of Post 6.8, User 6D agreeing to refrain from using the word 'hermaphrodite'), other users reported feeling alienated as a result of such challenges (such as Response 6.9 which commented that 'If you're not liberal in the correct ways […] AVEN can feel unwelcoming'). These posts and comments therefore show that the AVEN forums have clear rules for engagement with other users and that users are often aware of these rules and appeal to them to police each other's behaviour. In doing so, users show their familiarity with the community's ethos and consequently claim legitimacy for themselves as community members.

As a result of this finding, it seems that in the AVEN CoP, legitimate status is afforded to all users as standard but that it may be revoked for users who do not conform to AVEN's expectations for the treatment of other users. Whilst any member of AVEN has the right to challenge another member's legitimacy, then – regardless of the duration of time spent on the forums, their sexual identity or other factors – users who demonstrate adherence to the CoP's accepted behaviours may be more likely to gain the upper hand in such conflicts. This therefore indicates that familiarity with the CoP's rules can boost a member's legitimacy in times of personal conflict. In this sense, I conclude that behaviours deemed acceptable by the CoP's rules may hold more stead than ideals about the asexual topics under discussion. This answers RQ3, about how identities are negotiated within AVEN, as it shows that the

negotiation of identities is contingent upon members adhering to the rules governing their behaviour. It also answers RQ4, about the influence of the community's structure, in that it shows that user behaviour may be constrained by the forum's rules and that practices concerned with tolerance and treatment of others may be less flexible and changeable than those concerned with the meaning of terminology.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is closely connected to the idea of legitimacy but refers more to the manner of learning within the CoP. Davies (2005) states that CoP members learn from one another in the course of their interactions and that this provides a safe means for new or peripheral members to make mistakes and to further their knowledge of the community's practices. In the case of AVEN, this concerns learning not just about asexuality but also learning about the forum's rules for engagement such as tolerance and avoiding prescribing identities to others. Whilst this adheres to existing CoP theory, however, the online nature of the AVEN CoP presents a possible break away from these conceptualisations. This again relates to Davies (2005) assertion that 'gaining legitimacy is prior to gaining access to practice' because individuals can access the forum content without first needing to create an account or introduce themselves to other forum members. They are then able to lurk completely unseen (discussed in Section 4.2.1) and to learn the rules of the community, including learning from the mistakes made by other users (such as the correction of the use of 'hermaphrodite' as an example of inappropriate language use in the case of Posts 6.5 – 6.8) without needing to be approved or to make those mistakes themselves. Whilst they cannot be said to be participating in practices, they could be said to be participating in activities such as reading content and learning about asexuality, thus making their behaviour more in line with the concept of affinity spaces and again indicating that AVEN serves as both a CoP and an affinity space to different individuals. In this sense, and in answer to RQ4, the open nature of the AVEN CoP allows individuals to learn from and formulate their identities in relation to the CoP or affinity space without needing to go through the processes typically associated with gaining access to face-to-face CoPs. They may therefore negotiate their own identities in relation to those of active forum members as well as in relation to forum practices and information, by learning from but not participating in discussions, and this provides answer to RQ3.

Although I mentioned above that the AVEN CoP does not gate-keep access to the forums for the majority of users (exceptions exist for those under 13 years of age, for safety reasons, and those who have already been banned, to protect the community), the presence of moderators who monitor and correct behaviours when needed means that there is a degree of restriction embedded within the structure of the forums which holds users accountable to the rules. This is unusual in social CoPs where even the existence of hierarchies tend not to result in such clear or rigidly enforced rules (see, for example, Eckert (2000) and (Jones 2012). Rather, the AVEN CoP bears more similarity to business CoPs (Mullany, 2006; Schnurr, 2009; Schnurr and Chan, 2011) and other online CoP's (such as the eating disorder forum analysed by Stommel (2008) and the Lord of the Ring's forums in Thomas (2005)) in that those at the pinnacle of the hierarchy can exert pressure upon those lower down to adhere to the rules (as shown in my own analyses by the example of the moderators responsible for Posts 6.6 and 6.7 correcting usage of 'hermaphrodite' and the examples of moderation analysed in Section 6.2 in relation to users diagnosing another with illnesses). This imbalance within AVEN comes from the admods having additional powers to edit, delete or move posts, and to ban or otherwise restrict users who continually fail to comply with the rules and so ordinary users put their membership and reputations at stake, and themselves at risk of repercussions, when flouting rules. This formalisation of the process therefore incentivises compliance and creates a clear distinction between the AVEN organisation and its CoP.

Interestingly, however, the admods have the ability to move between their formal roles and the roles of standard users, as shown in the case of User 6Q in Section 6.2 switching from one role to the other in quick succession, creating a dissonance which blurs the boundary between the organisation and the CoP. This also has the effect of levelling the hierarchy somewhat, further highlighting the nature of online forums as being non-typical with regards to existing CoP theory. These findings therefore answer RQ3 in that the fluid nature of admod identities within the AVEN forums indicates that they must negotiate their roles in the moment, in response to the behaviour of other users, and that they straddle the divide between the organisation and the CoP. This in turn answers RQ4 because, whilst this fluidity has the potential to lead to the undermining of their organisational role as admods, by revealing them to otherwise be standard users, it may also be perceived as lowering the formality of the forums, in turn helping the CoP to remain casual and convivial. Thus, the dual roles of these users as both admods and standard users not only influences their own identifications at

specific moments in time but may also influence the identities of other users in relation to them and to the forums more widely.

My research has also found evidence within AVEN for Wenger's (1998) observations about CoPs orienting around a communal memory. This means that members are not required to know all of the community's practices or information about asexuality because the community as a whole can come together to collectively provide the answers. This is vital to a community as diverse as AVEN, where questions for support may not fully correspond to the experiences of those available to offer the support, and where insights from multiple individuals may therefore give a more comprehensive combined answer. It also helps those new to the forums to find their footing, enabling them to offer insights that they feel could be helpful without needing to be fully knowledgeable about the topic. This was apparent in Post 6.2 by User 6B in which they offered the label 'autocorissexual' whilst still being unsure of the spelling and, as User 6C then pointed out, also being unaware of a potentially more appropriate term. In this sense, User 6B was able to provide the OP with information which they could look into further, despite being unsure of it, because other users could step in and correct any errors. This in turn allows all members of the community to participate in the important practice of offering support and guidance, allowing them to build reputations for themselves and ultimately traverse the CoP's hierarchy. These factors mean that users are not prevented from providing potentially useful details just because they have not previously been granted legitimacy, which answers RQ4. These factors also answer RQ3 because they show that individual users are able to negotiate identities as useful contributors to other people's experiences through supportive and informative interactions.

Whilst the diversity of the AVEN community facilitates the answering of queries by providing a variety of views and experiences which can be drawn upon for answers, it also makes the community non-heterogenous in its views and ideals. This was captured most clearly in my analysis of the attraction versus desire definition debate discussed in Section 5.1 in which individuals not only showed different preferences over which terms are used to define asexuality, but also demonstrated different views over why these terms are more or less suitable. Similarly, in Section 5.1.1, I showed that views differ towards some subcategories of asexuality (for example, grey-sexual identities and heteroromanticism) and, in Section 7.1, I explored the different arguments made regarding where these subcategories

fit in relation to asexuality and queer classifications. Some individuals may experience marginalisation as a result of these differing opinions, as shown in the case of Posts 5.2 and 5.5 where users 5B and 5E indicated the potential for identities to be excluded by the phrasing of particular definitions, and this in turn challenges the AVEN organisation and CoP's attempts to be inclusive. These findings ultimately answer RQ3 in that they show that the negotiation of asexual identities within the forums is a continuous process and one which is dependent upon the nuances of definitions of asexuality. The different perspectives on what the focus of these definitions should be have therefore been shown to have implications for which subcategories are and are not included as asexual in different individuals' minds. This in turn may then influence how these individuals behave towards others when discussing asexuality, particularly in terms of who is deemed to have the right to make particular decisions. The structure of the forums, in terms of their heterogenous membership and their allowing all of these members to have a say, therefore has consequences for the identities of AVEN's members as it creates space for definitions and ideals to be presented which do not include some subcategories which others would potentially include. This therefore suggests not only the potential for conflicting information but also the potential illegitimation of some identities, providing answer to RQ4.

This thesis has therefore shown that the AVEN CoP is home to tensions and disagreements which may, at times, make efforts towards community cohesion difficult to achieve. These include disagreements about the best ways to define asexuality (Section 5.1) and differences of opinion on which asexual subcategories can legitimately claim the asexual label (for example, Posts 6.12 – 6.19). The AVEN CoP also features a prominent debate culture which is utilised to further understandings of asexuality by encouraging members to actively participate in assessing how asexuality is defined and the suitability of explanations put forwards by others. However, where this has the aim of fostering inclusion by being open to all AVEN members, it has also been shown to alienate some users who feel that it is imbued with toxic opinions that cannot be safely navigated (Responses 6.7 – 6.10). These factors also have a knock on effect for how asexuality is presented beyond the AVEN forums as they lead to an inability for the CoP's members to completely align with each other or to attain consensus on issues. This in turn hinders them from being fully united and from having a cohesive collective identity which complicates awareness raising and education efforts.

8.2.3 Summary

The current research has shown that the community which inhabits the AVEN forums operates consistently with existing CoP theory, offering a site in which individuals can learn not only about asexuality but also about how to behave as an AVEN member. Legitimate peripheral participation is key to this, enabling new members to find a place for themselves amongst more established users and to provide insights which may be of use to others whilst being permitted to make mistakes. These mistakes are permitted on the grounds that other users will be able to correct them informally, furthering the learning process, and that the admod team are available to deal with incidents which may cause harm to other users. My research has also shown, however, that users may have claims to legitimacy contested if they do not conform to forum rules for tolerance and the creating of a safe space, indicating that these are primary concerns for the AVEN organisation and its CoP membership and that the protection of these principles may take precedence over educational matters when the two come into conflict.

I would argue, then, that these points suggest that the CoP model is well suited to the study of AVEN because it provides tools which illuminate learning practices and the negotiation of identities between members in particular moments of interaction. However, this research has also shown that the online nature of the AVEN CoP, its system of moderators who undertake gatekeeping practices in order to keep the community's members safe, and the possibility that users have to lurk and learn without participating present some challenges to the CoP model and the concept of affinity spaces goes some way to providing solutions. This is considered further in Section 8.4.

8.3 Methodological reflections

This research was carried out using dual-phase ethnographic observations of the AVEN forums and an online survey of forum members. This section reflects upon these methods (Section 8.3.1 and 8.3.2) and my analytical approach (Section 8.3.3) in order to assess the successes and issues which were encountered in the course of this project.

8.3.1 Ethnography

My ethnographic observations within the forums took place in two key phases, the first of which consisted of introducing myself and my research and observing the practices of the CoP in a general sense from a non-directed, bottom-up perspective. This then fed into the building of my questionnaire, honouring Schleef's (2014: 43) advice that successful questionnaires should be underpinned by previous research which helps to 'gain insight into relevant issues'. Following the completion of the survey stage of my methodology, I then began the second phase of my ethnography which was directed by insights gained from the first stage and the survey. In this sense, phase 2 looked in more depth at my earlier observations in order to answer questions which had arisen and to find examples of forum posts for in depth analysis.

Although this dual-phase approach developed out of necessity – I had originally intended to conduct my ethnography in a single phase but personal circumstances meant this was not ultimately possible – the resulting approach became beneficial to my data collection. This is because it allowed me time to reflect upon the work done in the first phase of the ethnography and upon the survey results and to use these findings to tailor the second phase of the ethnography to home in on specific areas of interest. This was designed to mirror existing research, such as Jaffe's (2014) use of interviews with informants which provided extra metalinguistic data to contextualise her ethnographic observations, to gain feedback from participants and to ensure that the research fully represented their experiences and understandings of the situations under analysis. Although my own research did not involve participants in this way, I would argue that using the survey data to inform the focus of the second ethnographic phase adopted a like-minded approach which kept the interests of my participants, and what they perceived to be practices which were culturally significant to their community, at the heart of my study. This enabled me to conduct my research through what Cameron *et al*. (1992) refer to as an advocacy stance – that is, research *on and for* participants.

Whilst I had initially hoped to conduct my ethnography as a participant observer who joined in with the community's discussions, as discussed in Section 3.1.1.2, it was not possible to do this. Beyond starting and minimally contributing to two threads – one which introduced myself and one which introduced my research – then, my ethnographic data collection

consisted almost entirely of observations. This was greatly facilitated by the open structure of the forums which allowed me to often be present without being logged in, meaning that my username was not listed amongst those online during my periods of data collection, helping me to observe unseen. Whilst I had at first thought that my non-participation could be detrimental to my research, in practice I found that I was able to gain a great many insights from lurking, as discussed in relation to legitimate peripheral participation in Section 8.2.1. It is also possible that this more removed approach actually facilitated my research as the impact of the observer's paradox was much reduced.

From an ethical perspective, I agreed as part of my ethics application and my request to AVEN to use the site for research, that I would contact any user whose forum posts I sought to include in my thesis. This, I felt, was an important decision because I was conscious that the forum posts were not produced for my research, and in many cases referred to highly personal topics, and I wanted to give potential participants the opportunity to decline to be included in my research outputs. This also gave me the opportunity to offer to show them my analysis which I hoped would reassure them of my good intentions for using their data. Doing so meant that these participants therefore had the chance to reflect upon my conclusions and to offer any feedback or thoughts if they wished to, although few chose to utilise this option in practice. This, I hoped, would alleviate the issues encountered by Cerankowski and Milks (2010) when working with AVEN members where they found that participants were critical of their research because they felt the authors had been too removed from the community and had not properly represented it in their research. Whilst gaining feedback from participants was not originally a motivation for carrying out this step of my methodological planning, I feel that it proved beneficial to my data collection and relationship with the AVEN community by giving members the opportunity to give informed consent or to otherwise decline to have their data used in my thesis.

8.3.2 Survey

Building upon the observations made during my first ethnographic phase, my survey was designed to seek reflective answers on the respondents' lived experiences of asexuality and the AVEN community. Whilst the data generated from the survey provided answers to all four of my research questions, it was most critical for answering RQ1, about definitions and

their influence on identities, due to Question 12 asking respondents to define asexuality in their own terms. This enabled me to look in detail at the common features of the definitions through collocational analysis, and to analyse not only the individual responses but also the collection as a whole. From this, I was able to deduce which features (Section 5.1) and phrasings were most common and to subsequently analyse their significance. This in turn provided me with the means of understanding the impact of allonormativity upon definitions, providing some partial answers to RQ2.

When designing my survey, I began with an extended list of questions, but this led to a very long survey which would likely have dissuaded some participants from completing it. In reducing the number of questions, I opted to combine some, such as Question 14 – Would you place asexuality under the following umbrella categories – LGBTQ+ and queer? Whilst decisions such as this did ultimately reduce the number of questions without sacrificing the focus of the survey, it did make analysing some of the resultant data more difficult. For example, with Question 14, the single elaboration part (14b) did not separate each participant's thoughts on LGBTQ+ and queer inclusion and this consequently made it difficult at times to determine whether responses applied to LGBTQ+, queer or both simultaneously. On reflection, the responses given by my participants indicated that many were happy or even keen to give lengthy responses to questions and to put a great deal of thought and effort into their answers. This was a humbling realisation as it was clear from the length and depth of responses, and comments made thanking me for my interest in asexuality, that members of the AVEN community are particularly invested in discussing their experiences and that they see doing so as beneficial to themselves as well as – and often because of – the research. In hindsight, then, I believe I could have made more use of this willingness to participate by avoiding the conflation of questions which would have resulted in better quality data for these questions. This was not something that I could have anticipated at the outset of my survey design but, had I conducted a pilot study of my initial questions list delivered to a select few AVEN members, this would likely have become clear. I therefore believe that any future survey-based research that I conduct will benefit from a pilot study to gauge interest and response types and lengths.

In reflecting upon the design of my survey, it is also worth drawing attention to the ways in which two particular questions were answered. Firstly, whilst many participants responded to

the question about whether sexual vocabulary restricts understanding of asexuality (Question 33) in the way that I had hoped (by considering the impact that sexualised vocabulary has upon how asexuality is understood), it was clear from some answers that other users had misunderstood the question and others explicitly stated that they did not understand it. Whilst I was able to gain some interesting data from this question then, in hindsight it is clear that it was not well phrased and that this hindered the ability of participants to provide an answer that corresponded to the question's intention. This too may have been brought to light by conducting a pilot study which would have enabled me to make the question clearer before sending it out for completion by the community at large.

Secondly, whilst I knew it would be difficult to analyse due to the potential for a large variety of answers, I felt that it was important to allow my participants to voice any additional issues that they wished to add (Question 36) as this could reveal topics which had escaped me during the first ethnographic phase of my research. I anticipated that these could then be investigated further during the remainder of my ethnography. As it turned out, however, the majority of participants who gave an answer to this question felt that the survey was very complete as it was and some praised my phrasing of questions and the fact that I had avoided a sexually-normative bias and suggestions of links between sexual abuse and 'acquired' asexuality. Many users took the opportunity to thank me for taking an interest in asexuality, to express enthusiasm for new research which has the potential to increase awareness of asexuality, and to wish me luck with my project. A few respondents used this question to give extra information on topics previously answered or to express the importance of a particular topic (such as definitions of asexuality). Although these did not provide new avenues for investigation, they did serve to highlight the relevance of some previously identified themes which reinforced my need to investigate them further in the second ethnographic phase.

8.3.3 Analytical approach

As a study aiming to explore interactions between members of a community, the adoption of an analytical approach which allowed me to investigate the nuances of these interactions was key. To this end, I utilised Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity (2005) and tactics of intersubjectivity (2004a, 2005) and, as demonstrated in Section 8.2.1.1, these proved to be fruitful tools for exploring how members of AVEN negotiate their identities in relation to

each other, to asexuality and AVEN more widely, and to the outside allosexual world. The tactics, in particular, provided a useful framework for understanding how these negotiations work and the impact of power struggles between individuals seeking and defending their own places within the community. The three dichotomous pairs have been especially useful for framing these struggles as two-way processes, in turn highlighting the continuous and contested nature of identities (Jenkins, 2014; Section 2.2) within AVEN.

My use of these approaches has been carried out in conjunction with the CoP framework (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to analyse the AVEN CoP's inner workings and the ways in which its members interact with it. This framework has enabled me to maintain a focus on learning within the community, considering how members draw upon their own and each other's experiences in mutually beneficial ways. Considering the presence of joint enterprises and a shared repertoire, and the degree to which individual members aligned with them, allowed me to explore the value that the community holds for its members and the tensions that exist between those who do not fully agree with the AVEN organisation's – and their fellow users' – stances. In this sense, the CoP model has ensured that my focus upon the role of the community has remained paramount and has facilitated consideration of AVEN as a community which embraces diversity, seeks to safeguard its members and spreads awareness of asexuality. This framework and the principles of identity and ToIs, then, have been shown to supplement one another, with the CoP model providing a contextual backdrop influencing the identities that individuals construct and the tactics and principles providing greater insights into how individuals relate to the community itself. Thus, I argue that these three analytical concepts enrich each other and provide a greater depth of analysis for understanding identity construction and community affiliation.

As discussed in Section 1.2.2, AVEN has been used extensively in existing research on asexuality and I acknowledge that my own current research may contribute to the perpetuation of this limited focus, showing the practices and beliefs of a large but still limited fraction of the asexual population. Whilst I argue that AVEN is a suitable site for the study of identities in relation to community ideologies, I also recognise that this effectively restricts how representative my findings can be of asexuality more widely. Likewise, whilst practical for my own data collection, my decision to restrict my sample to those individuals over 18 years of age excluded younger asexual people from my samples. Research into youth

experiences of asexuality are largely missing from the asexual literature and so I posit that this is a section of the community who could benefit from increased attention in future research.

8.4 Further research

This thesis has shown that a sociocultural linguistic study of asexuality can provide key insights into the lived experiences of asexual individuals, including the means by which those individuals identify with asexuality, and the influence of allonormativity. It has therefore shown the value of incorporating consideration of allonormativity into discussions of normativity and sexual identity. In terms of CoP theory, this thesis has also shown that the CoP model is, in many ways, well suited to studies of community forums such as AVEN in that it offers useful tools for exploring the negotiation of identities in relation to key community practices and other community members, with the concepts of legitimacy, legitimate peripheral participation and communal memory being key to this endeavour. Finally, on a methodological note, I have shown that the use of a dual phase ethnography, employed primarily through lurking AND interspersed with findings from a survey, offered a suitable means of studying this community, directly engaging community members in my research via the survey and allowing their priorities to inform the direction of my research. Nevertheless, my research has also raised questions which would make for fruitful future research.

Chief amongst these is further research on asexuality and allonormativity. As a sexual identity which has, as yet, been poorly represented within academic research, particularly within the field of linguistics, a greater focus upon asexuality has the potential to add to existing discourses of language and sexuality, queer linguistics and normativity studies. The incorporation of discussions of allonormativity would also further research on these topics. This would expand the range of sexual identities and normativities being considered from a linguistic perspective which would, in turn, facilitate a greater understanding of sexual identities more broadly, as advocated by Bogaert (2015). Research on allosexuality, too, would be a welcome addition to the field, helping to unmark asexuality as non-normative, much as research on heterosexuality has helped to unmark homosexuality (as discussed in Section 2.1.2.2).

The topic of asexual coming out experiences would also make for important further study. My analysis in Section 7.2, in particular, has shown that many asexual people are aware that asexuality's marginal status may lead to them needing to explain what it means when coming out to family and friends and this seems to represent an aspect of asexual coming outs which are less common than in homosexual coming outs. Further studies of the asexual coming out process – particularly those which are focussed upon the language used when coming out – would therefore offer key insights into how the coming out experiences of asexual people and other sexual and gender minorities may differ. This could in turn further illuminate practices of oppression and marginalisation in relation to both asexuality and other minority sexual identities.

With regards to CoP theory, this thesis has also supported calls (Moore, 2006; 2009; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) for CoP research to draw upon the specificities of the communities under study. In particular, the ever-increasing use of online communities necessitates greater attention being applied to accommodating the peculiarities of online features in the CoP model. As Section 8.2.2 has argued, CoP theory accommodates users who do not participate extensively in CoP practices but do participate in activities but also finds that affinity spaces may be a better means of assessing their experiences of forums such as AVEN. These users may still benefit from their engagement with the CoP and may be able to take their newly gained knowledge into other CoPs and wider society, in turn contributing to aims of raising awareness. Further research on these sorts of users would also be pertinent, however, as their non-participation in practices may make it harder for researchers to spot their involvement.

8.5 Concluding remarks

This thesis has used survey responses and forum posts from AVEN's members to explore the construction of identities within the AVEN CoP and how these are formed in relation to the dominant allosexual culture. It has shown that although asexual identities are strongly influenced by allonormativity, and often erased or marginalised in the process, they also possess the power to challenge and destabilise it by proving the existence of an alternative relationship with sex and sexuality. Further, I have shown that the ethos of the AVEN CoP

helps to normalise asexual identities, in stark contrast to the allonormative messaging of wider society, and that the work and identities of its members ultimately push for greater visibility, tolerance and acceptance of asexuality.

I had initially hoped that this research could provide some insights and answers for questions about how to make definitions of asexuality more acceptable to the wide variety of identities which accumulate under the asexual umbrella. However, in the course of conducting this research, it has become clear that this is likely an unachievable endeavour. This is precisely because of the wide variety of identities which make up the asexual community and the fact that attempts to be inclusive of the asexual spectrum may be perceived to invalidate the identities of those who understand asexuality as being a complete lack of attraction or desire whilst, for others, a lack of this inclusivity excludes them from the umbrella. In this sense, the important takeaway from this research is that there should be no one-size-fits-all policy towards defining asexuality, and allowing space for different definitions and understandings is crucial to enabling individuals to identify with asexuality on their own terms. AVEN, then, provides a valuable platform on which this can happen.

This fluidity of definition has been shown to have repercussions for raising awareness of asexuality, with individuals expressing concern that it makes it harder to communicate asexuality to the wider public and newly-identifying asexual people alike. And yet, this has the potential to enrich the language of sexuality more widely, providing additional terms which can enable individuals to better understand themselves and their experiences. Thus, although asexuality is restricted by the language of allonormativity, it has adapted a vocabulary of terms which better describe asexual experiences and which could consequently provide more nuanced insights into allosexual experiences. As Bogaert states, then, 'Asexuality offers us a unique opportunity to look at sexuality through a new lens, affording perhaps a clearer (or at least new) view of what sex is and what it is not' (2015: 6).

And yet, this study has not only illuminated practices for defining asexuality. It has also considered the practices and principles which guide membership of the AVEN forums. In so doing, it has shown the value that the forums hold for their members, offering exposure to asexuality and education about an identity which can provide a new means of understanding experiences of relationality and belonging, prejudice and oppression. In this sense, the AVEN

CoP attains value from offering something which the allosexual world cannot, influencing its members' identities by over-riding dominant allonormative ideologies to instead frame asexuality as unproblematic and natural. Whilst tensions within the forums are prevalent, the fact that a space exists for these discussions to occur is testament to the benefits of online communities and the adaptive characteristics of communities of practice.

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Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval Form

Faculty of Arts Ethics Approval Form

Please submit this form to your School Ethics Officer **at least 2 months** before you plan to begin your research, along with:

- consent form
- written information sheet for participants
- signed declaration of ethical awareness
- questionnaire or focus group plan (if possible).

Please read the **Guidelines for Completing the Arts Ethics Form** (available on Workspace) before submitting the form to your School Ethics Officer.

Researcher name	Sam Rosen
School/Department	School of English
Project Title	'An investigation into the linguistic practices used by asexuals in the performance of their identity.'
Date	03/07/2016
Email address	[Redacted]

(1) Researcher Information – please tick as appropriate

☐ Member of Staff

☒ Postgraduate Researcher

Supervisors: Dr Lucy Jones and Dr Andrew Yip (Department of Sociology and Social Policy)

☐ Member of staff obtaining approval for a module

Module Code:

Module Name:

Is the research funded by an external body or part of an external funding bid?

☐ Yes Funding Body: ☒ No

If yes, does the funding body require proof of ethics approval?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(2) Research aims/questions

Provide a brief summary of the research aims/questions [max 100 words]

Through my research, I seek to investigate the ways that asexuals construct and perform their identities. I aim to clarify the distinction between sexual and romantic orientation, determine the relevance of definitions of 'sexuality' to perceptions that asexuals have of their sexual identity and to consider the impact that different interactional contexts have upon the identities that asexuals express. I will also establish a framework of identity for studying asexuality.

(3) Methods

a) Please indicate which methods you will be using:

☒ Questionnaire

☒ Focus groups

☐ Interviews

☒ Observation

☐ Psychophysiological measures (e.g. response time, eyetracking, ERP etc.)

☒ Data found online

☐ Data produced by students (e.g. their essays)

☐ Other; please specify:

b) Please give brief details of how you will be employing these methods [max 200 words]

I hope to conduct an ethnographic study of the community forums on a notable asexual website so that I can observe community practices and find out how members relate to one another, to asexuality and to the sexual world around them. I then intend to explore these observations more intensively by using them to formulate the questions on a questionnaire which I will then distribute to community members. This will allow me to gain more insights into what the asexual community means to its members and how they see themselves fitting within it and it will also enable me to seek a more informed understanding of how the community itself functions. The last stage of my research design will involve conducting a series of focus group sessions with community members in order to investigate the ways that the groups use language to project a shared asexual identity and to see the impact that the face-to-face context has upon the ways that individual identities are negotiated.

(4) Research Location

Please confirm where the research will take place:

☒ On Campus ☐ Outside the UK

☒ Elsewhere in the UK ☒ Online

If you are conducting your research outside of the UK, please state where:

N/A

(5) Research topics

a) Please confirm if your research involves any of the following:

Yes ☒	No ☐	Procedures likely to cause participants distress
Yes ☒	No ☐	Misleading participants about your research or withholding information
Yes ☒	No ☐	Investigation of sensitive issues (e.g. sexual, racial, religious or political attitudes, illegal activities etc.)
Yes ☒	No ☐	Investigation of personal topics (e.g. personal health, learning disabilities etc.)
Yes ☒	No ☐	Online data that requires a password to access

If you have ticked YES to any of the above, please provide more details below. Indicate any potential risk to participants, justify this risk and what steps will be taken to minimise it. For online data please provide details of the websites and how you will ensure consent is given.

I will be asking participants to talk about their experiences with their sexuality, a sensitive subject which has the potential to cause distress, especially when recalling negative experiences. Given the nature of my research, this may be unavoidable but I will make participants aware of this at the outset of my research and will make it clear that they are not obliged to discuss anything they would prefer not to talk about and that they can withdraw from the study at their discretion.

I think it would prove to be detrimental to tell participants that my research will be concerned with studying the specifics of their language use and so I would prefer to tell them only that I am investigating identity construction and not tell them about the language focus. This will therefore involve concealing an essential aspect of my research from participants but would be necessary to reduce the possibility of an observer's paradox being created.

I will be conducting my ethnographic research with the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN: www.asexuality.org). This is a publicly visible forum but some sections of the forum require users to log in for access. I intend to create an AVEN account (to make it easier to contact users and disseminate the materials for my research) and so this will give me access to these restricted forums. As these forums are not publicly available without password access, it will be necessary to seek additional permissions should I intend to use data from them and so I will be careful to make notes about which forums are subject to these restrictions in my fieldnotes and I can then address this accordingly.

I will ensure that consent is given at all stages of my research. As I will be focusing on the AVEN community, I will begin by asking permission from the website hosts to use the website for data collection and the recruitment of participants (the website is familiar with research requests and has a procedure in place to address these). I will also seek additional permission directly from any individuals whose linguistic data I wish to quote directly in my work. With regards to the questionnaire and focus group stages, I will provide all participants with an information sheet to explain the purpose of my research, to outline potential risks and to inform them as to how I intend to use their data and I will also ask them to complete a written consent form after reading this information.

At the outset of my data collection period, I also intend to make the above mentioned information sheet available on the forums in an introductory post in which I will introduce myself as a researcher and explain my research interests and aims.

(6) Participants, access and inducements

a) Please confirm if your sample will involve any of the following:

Yes ☐	No ☒	Participants under the age of 16
Yes ☐	No ☒	Adults of limited mental capacity
Yes ☐	No ☒	Participants recruited from special sources (e.g. educational institutions, prisons, hospitals etc.)

If you have ticked YES, please provide more detail information and justification:

N/A

b) Please confirm if you will be offering inducements for taking part:

Yes ☐ No ☒

If YES, please provide more detailed information and justification:

N/A

c) Please confirm if there is a risk of participants being identified in any form of dissemination

Yes ☒ No ☐

If you have answered YES please provide more detail information and justification
If you have answered NO please confirm how you will protect participants' identities

Although I will do all that I can to anonymise participants (eg: changing names, removing personal details/ references), some of my data will be taken from an online forum and it is possible that quotes taken from this data could be searched online. Where possible, I will therefore avoid quoting directly from the online data but, where occasions arise in which it might be preferable to quote such material, I will seek permission from the person who posted it and will make the risks known to them at this stage so that they will be able to decline should they be uncomfortable with this prospect.

(7) Data Storage & Dissemination

a) Please confirm that you will be storing your data in password-protected files

Yes ☒ No ☐

b) Please confirm if you will be destroying the data seven years after publication

Yes ☒ No ☐

If you have answered NO, please provide a justification and give details of where the data will be deposited

N/A

b) Please provide an indication of any intended dissemination or impact activities (if such activities are planned after the project is approved, please inform your School Ethics Officer of these changes and update consent procedures appropriately)

Following the completion of my PhD, I intend to make my research available to members of the AVEN community and the asexual community more widely. I also envisage that it may be possible for my work to contribute towards asexual awareness projects and so I seek to make it suitable for dissemination in such contexts.

(8) Declaration

Signed: (Sam Rosen)

Date: 3rd July 2016

Appendix 2 – Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Below you will find some information giving details of my research topic and how I intend to use the data that I collect. Please read this information carefully and answer the questions at the end of the page to indicate whether you do or don't consent to your answers being used in this way. The questions **must** be completed in order to continue with the questionnaire.

Research overview

My research is about identities in asexual communities. I am interested in exploring the perceptions that asexuals have of their own identities, the impact of social attitudes on asexual identities, and the different factors that are present in asexual identities within the AVEN community. With your help, I hope to explore these aspects of asexual identities and to contribute to efforts to raise awareness of asexuality.

I have chosen to focus my research upon the AVEN community and its members because of how important it is to the wider asexual community and because of its interest in promoting awareness and acceptance of asexuality.

Anonymity

All data will be anonymised (with names and usernames, locations and other identifiable information removed or otherwise obscured) before being included in my results. Prior to being anonymised, these details will be kept securely and will be accessed only by myself and, where necessary, by my supervisors. Once my research is complete, all of the raw data that I hold will be securely destroyed.

Although all efforts will be made to anonymise data, participants are warned that it is difficult to ensure complete anonymity for the following reason:

- Individuals use language in different and distinctive ways and so it is possible (although unlikely) that someone who is familiar with how you speak or write could identify you from any data that you provide, in the event that they were to read my research findings.

If you have any concerns about this, please get in touch using the contact details below.

Ethical Clearance

An application for ethical clearance was submitted to the relevant authorities at the University of Nottingham and this was approved on 23rd August 2016. I have also sought clearance from the AVEN Project Team to distribute this survey for research purposes and this was granted on 31st October 2016.

Contact Details

If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me [**Sam**] via private message on AVEN [user profile:] or otherwise email me at [ ] before completing the questionnaire.

Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form

1. **Consent form** Please note: for ethical reasons, if you are unable or unwilling to answer **Yes** to each of the below statements then it will not be possible to include your answers in my research.

More info

	* *Required*	
	Yes	No
I confirm that the purpose of the study has been explained and that I have understood it.	○	○
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and, if asked, they have been fully answered.	○	○
I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without consequence.	○	○
I understand that I can choose not to answer questions at my discretion.	○	○
I understand that all data are anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided and the data that is used.	○	○
I give consent for my anonymised data to be used within the described research project and in any associated talks, presentations and publications.	○	○
I understand the risks associated with participating in this study.	○	○
I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.	○	○

Appendix 4 – Survey Questions

Question		
Number	Text	Answer type
1	Consent form	Yes/ No
2	Confirmation of reading information sheet	Yes/ No
3	Age	Open
4	Location (city/town and country)	Open
5	Ethnicity	Open
6	Religion	Open
7	How do you describe your gender identity?	Open
8	How do you describe you sexual orientation?	Open
9	How do you describe your romantic orientation?	Open
10	Currently, do you consider yourself to be sexually active?	Yes/ No
10a	If you answered no, have you been sexually active in the past?	Yes/ No
11	Are you in a relationship?	Multiple choice - single
12	Please define asexuality in your own words	Open
13	How did you first discover the asexual label?	Open
14	Would you place asexuality under the following umbrella categories?	
	LGBTQ+	Yes/ No
	Queer	Yes/ No
14a	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
15	Do you feel that it is important to distinguish between sexual and romantic attraction?	Yes/ No
15A	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
16	Do you identify somewhere on the asexual spectrum?	Yes/ No
17	To what extent do you feel that asexuality forms a part of your identity? Please explain.	Open
18	Prior to identifying with your current sexual identity, did you identify with another sexual or romantic label?	Yes/ No
18a	If yes, please state.	Open
19	Have you ever come out or disclosed your asexual identity to others?	Yes/ No
19a	If yes, please indicate who you have disclosed your identity to.	Multiple choice - multiple
19ai	If you selected 'other', please specify.	Open
19b	If yes, have you needed to explain what asexuality is?	Yes/ No
19bi	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
20	Please describe your reasons for choosing to reveal or not reveal your asexuality to others.	Open
21	Feelings: abnormal, confused, free, happy, immature, inadequate, inexperienced, lonely, lost, proud, sad, strong, unique, unsure, weak	
	As a result of your asexuality, have you ever felt...?	Yes/ No/ Sometimes
	Any comments?	Open
22	Have you ever encountered any particularly positive or negative reactions or experiences as a result of your asexuality?	
	Positive	Yes/ No
	Negative	Yes/ No
22a	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
23	How do you feel asexuality is perceived by heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities?	Open
24	For what purposes do you use the AVEN forums and do you feel that AVEN satisfies these purposes?	Open
25	How long have you used the AVEN forums?	Multiple choice - single
25a	If you selected other, please specify.	Open
25b	Are you a registered user?	Yes/ No
26	How often do you...?	
	Visit	Multiple choice - single
	Post comments	Multiple choice - single
	Start new threads	Multiple choice - single
27	Do you feel that you 'fit in' with the AVEN community?	Yes/ Sometimes/ No
27a	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
28	Do you feel that AVEN is a welcoming community?	Yes/ Sometimes/ No
	Is this positive or negative?	Positive/ Negative
	Do you feel that AVEN is an inclusive community?	Yes/ Sometimes/ No
	Is this positive or negative?	Positive/ Negative
28a	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
29	Do you know any other asexuals outside of specifically asexual communities such as AVEN?	Yes/ No
29a	If yes, please provide some details about your relationship to them.	Open
30	Romantic terms: apromantic, aromantic, biromantic, cupioromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, lithromantic, panromantic, quoiromantic, skolioromantic, somnioromantic, WTF-romantic	
	Have you heard of this word?	Yes/ No
	Do you know what it means?	Yes/ No
	Have you ever used it to describe yourself?	Yes/ No
31	How do you feel about the number of labels available for describing asexual identities?	Open
31	If you came across an identity term that you were unfamiliar with, would you make a point of finding out what it meant?	Yes/ No
32a	If you answered yes, how would you go about finding out?	Open
33	Do you feel that the use of sexual vocabulary ever restricts the way that asexuality can be talked about and understood?	Yes/ Sometimes/ No
33a	Would you like to elaborate?	Open
34	If you are/ have been involved in a relationship, what terms do you/ have you used to refer to the person/ people you are/were in a relationship with?	Open
35	What is your preferred term for referring to people who do experience sexual attraction?	Open
36	Anything to add?	Open