

**ASEXUAL MASCULINITIES IN
U.S. POST-MILLENNIAL MEDIA:
THE BIG BANG THEORY
AND *DEXTER***

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1. INTRODUCTION

In her 2020 book on asexuality, Angela Chen discloses that at the age of fourteen, she “came across the word asexuality the same way most people do: online” (Chen 2020). This seemingly ordinary statement reveals the truth of most asexual people – that their first, if not only, identity-building experience is strictly confined to the media. Of course, in 2021, the same can be said for many queer youths: greater access to technology allows young people to learn about various gender and sexual identities from a much earlier age than in the previous generations (Jones 2018). However, asexuality, loosely defined as a lack of sexual attraction, remains one of the very few identities which have been shaped almost solely by the online and media experience. With the emergence of asexual online spaces towards the end of the 1990s and predominantly through the early 2000s, asexuality occupies a special position of a truly post-millennial identity as an identity belonging almost exclusively to the twenty-first century both due to the time in which asexuality began to take shape and due to its formation predominantly through online spaces.

Despite the rising visibility of asexuality throughout the twenty-first century, a significant portion of the discourse is still missing from contemporary research, having been confined mostly to online spaces. The most prominent of these online spaces, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), provides both an encyclopedia

of terminology related to asexuality, and a forum in which much of this terminology has been developed over the course of the past two decades. Founded in 2001, AVEN predates any serious academic considerations of asexuality. While some sexology research allowed for the hypothetical existence of asexuals decades earlier (Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953; Storms 1978), virtually no attention has been paid to this side of the sexuality spectrum until the rise of asexual visibility in the twenty-first century. The first researcher to consider asexuality as a valid contemporary topic was Anthony Bogaert, whose 2004 paper on the 1% prevalence of asexuality in the British national sample sparked further interest in the issue. In the following years, several papers were published, discussing the demographics and the formation of asexual identities (Prause and Graham 2007; Scherrer 2008; Brotto et al. 2010; Poston and Baumle 2010). In 2012, a study was carried out that confirmed the existence of bias against asexuals, demonstrating that asexuality was steadily finding its place among the known list of sexual identities, yet asexuals were viewed as less human and more discriminated against than other sexual minorities (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). However, very little serious research has been carried out regarding the representation of asexuals in the media, a rare example being a 2014 Routledge collection of essays and articles, in which one section was dedicated to the topic and revealed some instances of pathologization and medicalization of asexuality through media discourses (Cerankowski and Milks 2014). Even nowadays, research on asexuality remains scarce, and although some contemporary television shows, films, or independent documentaries include asexuals at least as minor characters, the discourse on the representation of asexuals in television fiction has mostly been confined to the AVEN forums and continues to be omitted from the scholarly narratives on asexuality.

Moreover, much of the discourse on asexuality produced both in academia and in popular media outlets fails to account for the gendered differences in asexual experiences. Many books and articles available about asexuality either neglect the gender

perspective completely or focus on female and/or non-binary asexuals, leaving asexual men out of the narrative. However, this omission is both unacceptable and unsustainable when taking into consideration the broader theories on gender identities and the importance of sexuality for the creation of these identities. Several researchers focusing on asexuality studies have drawn on Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality (1996) to discuss the contemporary "compulsory sexuality": the pervasive societal insistence that sexuality is not only natural and normal, but also indispensable to any person's happiness, health, liberation, and well-being, a notion discriminatory to any forms of asexual or non-sexual identities or relationships (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015; Przybylo 2019). Nevertheless, while compulsory sexuality no doubt influences the lives and decisions of people across the gender spectrum, it is also necessary to consider the interplay of sex and sexuality with gendered experiences.

Sexual activity and dominance, especially of the heterosexual variety, are almost always discussed as indispensable to the creation of masculine identities (Brannon and David 1976; Connell 2005; Kimmel 2005, 2008). The available – and limited – research on the self-reported experiences of asexual men suggests that asexuality is culturally coded as "unsustainable, uninhabitable, and damaging" (Przybylo 2014: 225) for masculine identities and asexual men might feel acutely deprived of certain bonding experiences with other men unless they perform compulsory (hetero)sexuality (Przybylo 2014: 225). In addition, the census of the asexual community conducted on AVEN since 2014 steadily reports much lower numbers of asexual men – around 12% (Ginoza and Miller 2014; Bauer et al. 2017; Weis et al. 2020) – than the numbers of asexual women, non-binary people, or other genders. This continuous imbalance suggests that there may be fewer men among asexuals than other genders, or, more likely, that asexual men have a much harder time accepting their asexuality, identifying as asexual, or discovering and actively participating in online asexual spaces than other genders.