

Abstract

Prior research has found that asexual people may fantasise or participate in activities typically conceptualised within mainstream society as ‘sexual’. These behaviours may be considered paradoxical when an asexual person is conceptualised as someone who does not experience sexual attraction or desire. This research aimed to explore how kinks and fetishes are conceptualised, experienced, and negotiated by asexual individuals. Forty-eight participants were recruited via the first author’s social media accounts and asexuality forums to take part in an online qualitative survey. The data were thematically analysed and three themes were developed. In *“Am I asexual?”: (How) can you be a kinky ace?*, we discuss the feelings of doubt or distress that some participants reported in relation to what was seemingly sometimes understood as the paradox between their self-identity as asexual and their exploration of kinks and fetishes, and how this was negotiated by these participants. In the second theme, *Between me and me’ and make believe: Kinks and fetishes as solo and imaginary*, we report on how kinks, fetishes, and fantasies were often understood in a solitary context and as either undesirable – or impossible – to live out. In the final theme of *Kink as a sensual enhancement in relationships*, we highlight the ways in which participants positioned their kinks and fetishes as an agent for intimacy. These findings expand our knowledge and understanding of how asexual people negotiate kinks and fetishes and capture the complexities of asexual identities beyond a lack of sexual attraction or desire, particularly in relation to the notion of autochorissexualism.

Key words: Aromantic; asexuality, autochorissexualism; BDSM, demiromantic; kink, fantasy

Can I be a kinky ace?’: How asexual people negotiate their experiences of kinks and fetishes

Since the early 2000s, a thriving asexual (or ‘ace’) community has developed, predominantly online through the 119,000+ members of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015; see <https://www.asexuality.org/en/> for current membership). A frequently cited definition of an asexual person is someone ‘who does not experience sexual attraction’ (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2019). Over the past decade, there has been growing public awareness and curiosity around asexuality (Broughton, 2015). The formerly unreported ‘fourth orientation’ of sexuality (Storms, 1980), has recently gained mainstream exposure in social media and online news articles (e.g., Gordon, 2015; Wallis, 2012). The heightened visibility of asexuality is illustrated in how some celebrities and public figures have openly declared themselves as asexual. These include glamour model and bodybuilder Jodie Marsh (Wareham, 2017), musician Jake Coco (Coco, 2016), and television personality Caitlin Jenner (Shenton, 2015). The growing recognition of asexuality is also reflected in how the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer initialism LGBTQ has been expanded to sometimes encompass asexual identities (e.g., LGBTQA) (Canning, 2016). This ever-increasing coverage of asexuality has also been mirrored in the academic literature, where asexual theory and research has gathered considerable momentum in recent years (Carrigan, Gupta & Morrison, 2013; Mitchell, 2016). Nonetheless, asexuality remains relatively under-researched in comparison to other sexualities and it is vital to further our knowledge and understandings of the complexities of asexuality and asexual identities (Mitchell, 2016; Vares, 2018). One such complexity is in how asexual people might negotiate their identities in relation to practices which have sometimes been situated as sexual (Sloan, 2015). In this paper, we report findings from a qualitative online survey which sought to explore how asexual people who identified

themselves as having a kink or fetish understood and negotiated these kinks and fetishes in relation to their asexual identity.

Academic research on asexuality

Despite the growth in academic interest, research with asexual people is relatively new and many aspects of asexuality remain underexplored (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015; Vares, 2018). Carrigan (2011) has argued that simplistic one-line definitions of asexuality do not demonstrate the diversity of the asexual community. Therefore, academic representations of asexuality, to date, may not fully capture the heterogeneity and diversity of asexual individuals (Carrigan et al., 2013, Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2017a). Further, broad definitions of asexuality as a “lack” of sexual attraction inherently imply that sexual attraction *should* be present (Mitchell, 2016). This means that asexuality could arguably be understood as defined on the basis of something missing, and therefore as a “deficit identity” (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; also see Scott, McDonnell & Dawson, 2016, for a discussion of how asexuality can be understood as a ‘negatively defined identity’, based on what it is not). This focus on what is “lacking” has perhaps contributed to an overlooking of what is present and fulfilling in the lives and relationships of asexual people. Additionally, it has been highlighted that researchers need to move beyond scripts of sexual normality to further understand asexuality (Przybylo, 2013). Asexual people may not feel sexual attraction, but this does not preclude them from positively experiencing the desire to cuddle or have (romantic or non-romantic) emotional connections and intimacy with another person (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes & Erskine, 2010; Dawson, McDonnell & Scott, 2016; Scherrer, 2008). These types of factors challenge normative assumptions that attraction and relationships inherently include sex and enable us to explore sensuality and a/sexuality in new and unique ways (Bogaert, 2016).

The existence of numerous variations of asexuality have been discussed within asexual communities and noted in some psychological and sociological literature (e.g., Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2015; Carrigan, 2011; Robbins, Low & Query, 2016; Scott et al., 2016; Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2017b). The term asexual can therefore be understood as an umbrella term, which captures a range of nuanced identities, sometimes referred to as asexual spectrum identities (e.g., Carrigan, 2011; Pasquier, 2018; Robbins et al., 2016). These include demisexual (the potential for sexual attraction to develop when an emotional bond has formed; e.g., Asexuality Archive; Gupta, 2017; Yule et al., 2017b); greysexual/graysexual (someone who may have rare or infrequent experiences of sexual attraction, but is otherwise asexual; Asexuality Archive; Yule et al., 2017b); and identities whereby *romantic* attraction is considered distinct from *sexual* attraction (e.g., aromantic; the lack of romantic attraction to others; identities such as biromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, and panromantic, where someone enjoys some intimate behaviours such as cuddling, but 'probably not kissing' with particular genders; Asexuality Archive; Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2015). The distinctions between these identities can be seen in an educational resource entitled '*The Genderbread Person*' (Keener, 2015; Killerman, 2017; Moe et al., 2017), whereby sexual/asexual and romantic/aromantic attraction are considered part of a wider group of sexuality and gender spectrums. These variations indicate that 'asexual' and 'allosexual' (defined by some to describe those who are sexual, as in contrast to asexual; see Asexuality Archive; Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2016; Dawson et al., 2016) may not be as dichotomous as common definitions seem to imply. These types of complexities indicate the variance and nuances of asexuality, and suggest that some asexual people may incorporate sensual or even sexual activities into relationships, while maintaining an overarching asexual orientation.

Blurring the boundaries of sensual and sexual in relation to asexuality

Little research has explored the presence of intimate relationships or sensual or sexual feelings and activities as part of asexual people's lives (for exceptions see Brotto et al., 2010; Dawson et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008). Yet asexual spectrum identities indicate that desire, sex, and sensual or sexual activities can be understood as on a spectrum rather than within a binary conceptualisation of allosexual or asexual. This variation is also reflected in terminologies used to describe perspectives on sex; sex-positive, sex-neutral, sex-negative and sex-repulsed (Carrigan., 2011). In a recent census of 9000+ asexual people conducted by AVEN (2018), attitudes towards sex were primarily sex-repulsed (37%) or sex-indifferent (26%), although many participants reported that their attitudes fluctuated or remained uncertain. These terms may be used by asexual people because they potentially capture that these relate to personal perspectives on sex rather than political or ideological ones (Asexuality Archive; Haley-Banez, 2017). They also demonstrate that rigid boundaries between sexual and allosexual may not apply and indicate that there are often nuanced grey areas rather than distinct binaries in asexual definition and experience. Further, affection and romance may (or may not) be highly valued by asexual people even though sex (may or) may not feature in asexual people's lives and relationships (Dawson et al., 2016; Scherrer, 2008).

Another area worthy of consideration when exploring asexuality and the complexities of feelings, fantasies, and behaviours is masturbation. Researchers have conducted investigations comparing masturbation rates and fantasy stimuli between asexual and allosexual individuals (Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2014; 2017a). Whilst asexual participants reported masturbating significantly less than allosexual participants, of those asexual participants who did masturbate, nearly half the women and three-quarters of the men reported engaging in sexual fantasies when doing so (Yule et al., 2017a). Despite such sexually arousing fantasies, these participants were keen to emphasise that their fantasies did not involve other people, suggesting emotional or sensual stimuli rather than fantasies of

another person. The authors concluded that there was a disconnection between identity and fantasy and that this reflected a diverse heterogeneity in asexual individuals. These findings give a sense of how masturbation might be incorporated within some asexual people's lives and identities. What is less clear is how asexual people conceptualise and incorporate fantasies, desires or kinks into their asexual identities.

Kinks, fetishes, BDSM and asexuality

Within academic sources, 'kink' refers to a range and variety of sexual activities considered to be 'outside the norm' (Christina, 2011; Rehor, 2015), where "the norm" is 'vanilla sex' (sometimes described as dull conventional sex, usually involving genital penetration; see Ribner; 2009). The term 'kink' can also be used in reference to BDSM, an acronym used to encompass bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism, and various activities that involve the exchange of some form of power, pain or sensory deprivation (Faccio, Casini & Cipolletta, 2014; Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt & Castaldo, 2015; Freeburg & McNaughton, 2017). Whilst BDSM activities may sometimes (and are often assumed to) be located within a sexual context, BDSM practitioners have expressed feelings of fulfilment via emotional and mental experiences (which may or may not be experienced as sexual) rather than genital contact or orgasm being a requirement (Simula, 2019a). This suggests that being kinky does not necessarily equate to either being sexual per se, or engaging in sexual contact.

The term 'fetish', however, is most commonly defined as 'an object, body part, or behaviour that triggers *sexual* responsiveness in an individual' and tends to be associated with "atypical" stimuli (Stockwell, Walker & Eshleman, 2010, p. 309; emphasis added). A 'fetish' could therefore be positioned as a specific sexual interest or trigger, whereas 'kink' could refer to non-vanilla activities. The overlap between the terms 'kink' and 'fetish' means

that the remainder of this paper will refer to them interchangeably. Following recent mainstream interest in kink perhaps as a result of media representations in books and films such as the *Fifty Shades of Grey*ⁱ franchise (James, 2011), kink research has been predominantly focused on BDSM (Stiles & Clark, 2011; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Other aspects of kinks and fetishes have been relatively under-studied. One exception is research which has explored niche kinks and fetishes such as pup-play (Wignall & McCormack, 2017), and adult-baby play (Hawkinson & Zamboni, 2014; Zamboni & Madero, 2018), where adults experiment with roleplay and experience a pleasurable loss of responsibility as human ‘pups’ or babies.

As highlighted, feelings, fantasies, masturbation, and sexual interactions do play a part in some asexual people’s lives (e.g., Scherrer, 2008; Yule et al., 2017a). However, there has been minimal focus on exploring asexuality and BDSM (Simula, 2019b). To the best of our knowledge only one study has explored these specific topics. Sloan (2015) interviewed fifteen asexual individuals who participated in BDSM activities – acts which are typically understood to result in sexual desire. Despite partaking in the same ‘dominant’ or ‘submissive’ roles that are present in BDSM, the asexual interviewees described the ability to adapt BDSM practices into acts of pleasure built on trust, self-discipline and power, without the need for sexual acts. The pleasure obtained from their BDSM interactions was solely psychological and emotional and construed as vehemently non-sexual. Overall, research, to date, indicates that asexual people may pursue or enact their BDSM desires.

This study aimed to expand upon existing knowledge of asexual people who may experience or enact desires which on the basis of conventional understandings have often been broadly understood as ‘sexual’ (see Sloan, 2015). We did so by exploring their experiences of kinks and fetishes and how these are negotiated within their asexual identities. Understanding and conceptualising the experiences of asexual people who fantasise or enact

desires will contribute to an increased knowledge and understanding of the diversity within asexual identities and move beyond monolithic notions of asexuality (Yule et al., 2017a).

Method

Participants

To be eligible to take part, participants needed to identify as asexual, or within an asexual or aromantic spectrum, and to consider themselves to have a fetish or kink. Participants ($n = 48$) ranged in age from 18 to 35 years ($M = 22$ years). The majority of participants were women including 2 who selected trans women ($n = 35$), with the remaining participants men including 3 who selected trans men ($n = 8$), as well as 3 agender and 2 genderfluid respondents. Most identified as White ($n = 34$), with a range of other racial/ethnic identities (e.g., African-American, Asian, Hispanic). Participants were mainly from the U.S.A ($n = 25$) with others from the U.K. and elsewhere. Other researchers have reported asexual samples with similar demographic characteristics (e.g., mainly young White women including some trans participants) and this may reflect the demographic profile of asexual people, particularly those who participate in online asexual communities (e.g., Dawson et al., 2016; Rothblum, Heimann & Carpenter, 2019; Sloan, 2015). Participants were asked to *list any other terms that you use to describe or identify your asexuality, if any (e.g., demi-romantic, aromantic, Grey A, etc.)*. The most common terms were aromantic ($n = 8$); biromantic ($n = 1$); demisexual ($n = 8$); Grey A ($n = 5$); demi-romantic ($n = 3$); heteroromantic ($n = 1$); homoromantic ($n = 3$); pancurious ($n = 1$); panromantic ($n = 2$); and polyromantic (1). We list these terms, and their age, alongside their quotations in the results section. We provided a list of options for participants to report their relationship status and most chose single ($n = 34$). Full demographics are reported in Table 1.

<<Insert Table 1 here>>

Materials

A qualitative survey design was chosen to enable us to ask participants open-ended questions, which allow participants to respond in their own words, and offer the potential for in-depth and detailed answers (Terry & Braun, 2017). An online survey (via *Qualtrics* software) was deemed appropriate given the predominance of online asexual communities (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015). Online surveys also allow participants to experience a sense of felt anonymity, which was important given the potentially sensitive and personal nature of the topic (Terry & Braun, 2017). Eleven open-ended survey questions were developed based on the authors' interest in the topic and by drawing on the existing academic literature on BDSM, kinks and fetishes and/or asexuality. The questions sought to explore participants' understandings of their sexuality (e.g., *Please describe your sexuality in your own words*); what constitutes a kink or fetish (e.g., *What types of behaviours or fantasies would you consider to be kinks or fetishes?*); their own kinks and fetishes (e.g., *Please outline a fantasy that you are comfortable to share for our research purposes*); and how kinks and fetishes 'fit' with their asexual identity (e.g., *Do you feel that kinks and fetishes 'fit' with asexual identities and if so in what ways?*; *How much awareness do you feel there is of kinks and fetishes in online or offline asexual communities?*). Participants were then invited to add any other comments (*Do you have any other comments, thoughts, or experiences that you have not yet voiced and wish to share on the topic of asexuality and kinks and fetishes?*). Ethics was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol. The survey was piloted with 6 asexual individuals to test out whether the questions were clear and to provide an opportunity for participant feedback on wording or other aspects (Terry & Braun, 2017). Minor design corrections were made to the survey before it was more widely distributed.

Recruitment and procedure

Participants were recruited via social media (e.g., *Tumblr/Twitter*) and asexuality pages and forums (e.g., *Facebook* page of *Asexual ACES*), where permission of moderators was sought to post calls for participants. On clicking the link, participants were presented with an information sheet. This informed them in more detail about the topic and purpose of the study, what participation involved; withdrawal; anonymity; confidentiality; data protection; and sources of support should they need them. The first author disclosed their identity as asexual and mentioned their active membership in asexual communities in recruitment calls and on the information sheet. A participant consent form was provided, and participants were presented with the survey, followed by demographic questions to enable the researchers to situate the sample. Participants were required to create a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity and these are used in reporting the analysis.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is particularly useful for under-researched topics (such as this) due to the potential to identify common themes across the data to capture patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Critical realism has been said to treat the world as theory-laden but not theory-determined and was chosen due to the appeal of legitimising participants' realities whilst acknowledging that these realities are informed by societal and cultural influences (Fletcher, 2016; Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007). Survey responses were downloaded to *Microsoft Excel* and collated into a *Microsoft Word* document to enable ease of coding. Both authors repeatedly read the data to gain familiarisation with the responses and noted points of interest. An inductive (or bottom-up) approach was taken whereby codes were generated directly from the data rather than aiming to find particular codes based on pre-existing concepts. However, the researchers' existing knowledge will have inevitably shaped the coding process. The dataset was organised into both semantic codes that reflected the language used by the participants and latent codes which moved

beyond surface meanings. The codes were collated into an early version of candidate themes, with the help of thematic maps. The early theme ideas were initially led by the first author before both authors met to collaboratively discuss coding, the development of existing theme ideas, and further analysis. Theme definitions were developed alongside participant quotes to 'test out' themes, ensure they were coherent, and assess how well they mapped onto the original data. The candidate themes were further reviewed by both authors who discussed the central organising concept of each theme and checked that they were distinct with no overlap between them. This led to some changes in the content and structure before the final names of themes were decided upon. Findings were presented at a conference before additional minor adjustments during the writing of the analytic report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The first author is a self-identifying asexual who actively engages with online and offline asexuality communities. His role as a researcher overlapped with his personal interest and classified him as, in some ways, an 'insider' (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). However, given the diversity of asexual identities, the range of asexual communities in existence (e.g., *ACE Tumblr*; *AVEN*; *Reddit*), and his other demographics (e.g., age; gender; non-disabled; race and ethnicity), he may be an outsider as much as an insider. The second author identifies as bisexual and has a keen academic interest in sexualities research. In this sense, she could be considered a (perhaps somewhat knowledgeable) 'outsider' to the topic. The first author's position as (broadly) an insider may have given him an advantageous position during design and recruitment, and enabled particular insights into the data based on his own asexual identity, which may have been unobtainable to outsiders (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Perry, Thurston & Green, 2004). However, McDonald (2013) has argued that 'matching' the identity of research participants is not necessary to gain knowledge and understanding of their experiences, and there is no guarantee that the first author's own distinct experiences as

an asexual person would be shared by participants (also see Bridges, 2001; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). In relation to BDSM, kink, and fetish communities, both researchers were 'outsiders'. This has implications particularly in relation to being ethically and culturally sensitive when asking questions, analysing data, and reporting results. It may have meant that our reading of the data was limited by being outsiders, and our 'noticings' and interpretations may be different from those who are members of BDSM, kink, and fetish communities. We informed ourselves about these topics, aimed to ask open questions, and were particularly careful to be respectful of our participants in our analysis (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

Results

Three themes were developed from the data; (1) "*Am I asexual?*": (*How*) *can you be a kinky ace?* (feelings of doubt or distress relating to the process of self-identity when exploring sexuality and kinks and fetishes), (2) '*Between me and me*' and *make believe: Kinks and fetishes as solo and imaginary* (reports of kinks, fetishes and fantasies as solitary and as undesirable – or impossible – to live out) and (3) *Kink as a sensual enhancement in relationships* (the utilisation of kinks and fetishes as an agent for intimacy).

'*Am I asexual?*': (*How*) *can you be a kinky ace?*

Many participants reported or recalled periods of identity confusion or uncertainty about having kinks, fetishes, or fantasies in general, during a time when they had identified as asexual:

[Confusion over my kink identity feels] very scary, am I valid? Am I not? Does this [my kink identity] mean I'm not asexual? Does it make me any less of an asexual? Your whole identity becomes invalid. Other asexual people can't relate to feeling sexual and sexual people can't relate to being asexual. So where do you go? (Ken, 19, homoromanticⁱⁱ)

I first began believing I was ace before getting into a relationship with anyone. I was then confused when I felt sexual attraction for someone and even more confused when I liked [a] specific fantasy. It feels hard and sometimes overwhelming because I just don't know where I belong. I feel like there's no one else out there who is like me and like I don't fit in. It feels like no one understands me. (Quinn, 18, demisexual)

These quotations show how a sense of dissonance can arise for those who identify as asexual and then (seemingly paradoxically) found themselves feeling sexual attraction within the context of kink (although in Ken's extract the sexual feeling is implied rather than explicitly stated). The adoption of asexual spectrum identities may have been what helped these participants make sense of the lack of fit between asexuality and their sexual feelings and fantasies. However, even though participants had made sense of any apparent conflict for themselves, others were reported to not understand them. This lack of understanding or validation of their identities seemingly creates a sense of isolation and leaves them feeling that they have nowhere to belong. While researchers have noted that some asexual people may feel excluded from the wider sexualised society (e.g., Rothblum et al., 2019), these narratives give a sense (while not explicitly stated) of feeling alienated and excluded from both sexual (kink) communities *and* asexual communities. The complexities of identifying with asexual alongside kink highlights the limitations of broad or umbrella definitions of 'asexual'. Any sexual fantasy or feeling seemingly serves to invalidate one's identity if asexuality is defined within rigid parameters (Carrigan, 2015). For Ken, negotiating a kink identity alongside an asexual identity required knowledge of asexuality as both an outright identity and as a spectrum of varying sexual and romantic feelings. These feelings were voiced by several participants with regard to other people's lack of understanding of what it meant to be asexual with a kink or fetish.

Other participants had found solutions to negotiate their identities and position their kink within an inclusive narrative around asexuality, such as Ashlyn, who described themselves as a sex-repulsed aromantic:

For a long time I didn't know what getting 'turned on' was and if what I was experiencing counted. As I got older and more into mildly kinky things, I got more confused about how I could be ace but "into" that, but I've since concluded there's not really a relationship between fantasies and sexual attraction. (Ashlyn, 19, sex-repulsed aromantic)

Ashlyn's ability to carve a space for both fantasy and asexuality to co-exist harmoniously required a conceptualisation that fantasies and sexual attraction are separate constructs. This positioning of identity as complex and multi-faceted has been identified previously elsewhere in a different way, when AVEN users described how the separation of romantic and sexual attraction allowed physical contact to be perceived as affectionate rather than sexual (Scherrer, 2008). These types of distinction provide the potential to permit asexual people to conceptualise BDSM and kink activities (sometimes viewed as 'sexual' but not always viewed in this way by those who practice BDSM and kink) as not necessarily sexual. For some then, feelings of pleasure arose through affection, escapism or power. These attractions and fantasies can be meaningfully incorporated into people's identities in a way which allows for an ongoing affiliation with an asexual identity. This mirrors the previous research with asexual BDSM practitioners, who highlighted how BDSM activities can be navigated in a way that can bring pleasure without sexual contact (Sloan, 2015) or through 'games' or intense experiences (Faccio et al., 2014). One participant in our research summarised this concept:

On a base level, [kink] pretty much seems to directly contradict our [asexual] identity. However, I strongly believe that emotion, behaviours and fantasies are entirely separate in the mind of an asexual: if they deem it to be. The separation of these enable satisfaction or enjoyment to come of 'sexual' actions whilst still avoiding those sexual elements. For example, I personally enjoy power play because it enables me to play a character - a form of escapism, fantasy. (Missy, 23, biromanticⁱⁱⁱ)

For Missy, the answer to the question 'am I asexual?' would appear to be a defiant 'yes', despite having a kink that could be construed as 'sexual'. Accepting their feelings did not discount asexual identity allowed Missy to satisfactorily negotiate asexuality and kink. Approaching kink in this way allowed some participants to experience and negotiate kink harmoniously alongside their asexual spectrum identities, sometimes enhancing their feelings of inclusion in the ace community, although this integration and sense of inclusion was not achieved by all participants.

'Between me and me' and make believe: Kinks and fetishes as solo and imaginary

One of the most common themes in the data was the notion that their fantasies were totally solitary and private, with no involvement from anyone else. One participant described their kinks as 'between me and me':

I have no instinctive urge to engage in any sexual activities with others and in "real life" sex as a concept or idea is as interesting as watching paint dry. In my head though, it is a stimulating concept, as long as other, often not real, people are the centre of the idea. (ItWasn'tMe, 28, aromantic)

This response demonstrated a stimulation and arousal devoid from physical stimuli. The notion that 'real life' sex was considered less interesting than how it was imagined was

shared by Olivia, who described their cyberpunk and dystopian kinks as 'impossible, rather than realistic':

I have met other asexuals on [a fetish website] and we agree that kink is more interesting than sex. I am not aware of any asexuals who have real-life kinks and fetish play, but I do know they exist. (Olivia, 22, aromantic)

These participants positioned their fantasies as separate from, but a potential gateway into, kink – without the need to necessarily live these out for themselves, despite reporting that other asexual people had experienced their fantasies in 'real life'. With no boundaries to the imagination, the roles these asexual individuals played in their own fantasies had no limits, as one participant described:

My sexual fantasies involve fantasy or sci-fi. Things that don't truly exist in my world. Vampires, werewolves, elves [sic], dragons, etc. Like many people I believe, I just wish I could escape into the world of Make-Believe that we like to watch and read as humans, like books and TV shows [...] Who doesn't want to be a wizard or live in the world of aliens and spaceships? (Crescent Moon, 26, demisexual)

For Crescent Moon, the concept of 'make-believe' creatures and environments held the key to safe and enjoyable fantasies. The idea of experiencing the impossible was considered both thrilling and tantalizing. Such fantasies have previously been reported by some asexual people on AVEN (2005), though described with a clear detachment of self from the activities being imagined. Bogaert (2012) identified this phenomenon as 'autochorissexualism'; identity-less attraction or the lack of one's identity during fantasies. Despite being a recently coined term, several participants identified with autochorissexualism, including Olivia:

I'm sure as a researcher you are aware of autochorissexuality, that is, the lack of oneself in one's fantasies. I fall squarely into that. "I" take on roles, other personas, occasionally those from television shows and such and project onto them. (Olivia, 22, aromantic)

Whilst this response linked to autochorissexualism, Olivia described going further than being 'identity-less' and instead shifting their identity freely within a fantasy by playing a variety of roles. Frequently these roles were totally detached from their asexual identity, taking a third-person view as one participant described:

I like to read comics which play into specific settings or kinks. Mostly public sex, such as on a train, when the ones participating in sex are being seen or afraid of being seen. [...] I don't really fantasise about me. My fantasies are a bit like porn, seeing other people without being aware of yourself as the viewer. (Thranduil, 18, panromantic^{iv})

Despite Thranduil's response sounding almost voyeuristic, there was a detachment from their sense of self in relation to their fantasy, and every part of the scenario was purely fictional. For autochorissexual participants, kinks and fetishes were understood as part of an individual's unique desires and fantasies, which were either undesirable – or impossible – to experience in real-life. This disconnection between fantasy and reality has been previously identified in asexual literature, primarily by the work of Yule et al. (2017a) in their study of sexual fantasy and masturbation amongst asexual individuals. Results suggested that while asexual people were less likely to have sexual fantasies, those that did were less likely than allosexual fantasists to involve other people in their fantasies. Whilst the subject of those who did not fantasise about other people was not clarified, it is possible such participants would identify with autochorissexualism. Therefore, as the participants in the current study and that

of Yule et al. (2017a) demonstrated, autochorissexualism appears closely linked to some people's asexual spectrum identities.

Kink as a sensual enhancement in relationships

Whilst 'sex' (commonly understood as sexual contact and coitus) could be assumed to be unappealing to many asexual people, previous research indicates that some asexual people engage in sexual activities for a variety of reasons (e.g., procreation or satisfying an allosexual partner and for the benefit of relationships) (Brotto et al., 2010; Dawson et al., 2016; Miller, 2011). In this study, some participants located engaging in kink in potentially sexual environments as enhancing intimate relationships, creating a sensual bond between individuals in a way that sexual activities or penetration alone were not understood to provide. Typically, these participants described BDSM as the subject of these activities:

I would consider kinks or fetishes anything where a person derives pleasure (sometimes sexual) from an act, scenario, or object that is not generally considered a typical part of the sexual experience. [...] I have always been interested and pushed for mild BDSM. My husband had never experienced biting, bondage, or role-play until we were together. For me, there is a thrill in knowing I have control or have given up control. Something that goes beyond sexual pleasure. There is something to be said for the trust it takes to give yourself up to someone else's whims and being tied up.

(Dottie, 23, aromantic/demisexual^v)

Dottie positioned the pleasure derived from these intimate experiences of kink as 'beyond sexual'; instead it was understood to enhance relationship bonds through trust and power. This was akin to how BDSM practitioners frame their activities as an exploratory experience for both body and mind in a way not always achievable in 'vanilla' sex (Simula, 2019a;

Turley, 2016). Other participants engaged in intimate activities that utilised dominance and submission through playful role-play:

Another kink [my partner and I] have is kitten/owner kink. (It's important, especially in this situation to clarify that this isn't some kind of sexual attraction towards animals, just some aspects we may associate with that animal. For example, cats are cute, often spoiled and playful. Also, someone may find people wearing cat ears attractive. There's some obvious power dynamics that people involved in this kink like, one party takes care of and the other is being taken care of.) There's both a sexual and a non-sexual side to this. (Elune, 24, bi-romantic)

Kitten-play is a roleplaying activity that has recently become popular on the gay scene (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). Elune's final line in the extract above mirrored the views of many gay and bisexual 'pups'; pup-play can have a sexual element for some but can equally be non-sexual (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). The dyadic elements create an additional spiritual experience, similar to the description of dyadic intimacy offered here:

I think environment and atmosphere are important in setting the mood. Temperature, smell, texture, lighting, sound, etc. They all play a part in making a potential sensual or sexual experience more enjoyable. As for me: candle light, ambient music, earthy incense, the softness of skin against skin and becoming deeply intimate through the sharing of breath and eye contact. Sex should be a spiritual experience; a ritual of the sense and of union rather than being reduced to some base-level, animalistic act. [...]
It's about love and connection, bonding on a deeper level. (Illuminess, 35, demisexual)

This participant described their fantasy as a complex, multi-sensory experience, with its own *mise-en-scène*. This demonstrated the depth and value some of these participants placed on intimate, sensual activities, regardless of whether they were considered sexual. Connecting and bonding with another person (sometimes physically and) emotionally was viewed as highly desirable, a narrative previously reported in research with asexual and allosexual participants (Dawson et al., 2016; Simula, 2019a). Whilst these desires may mirror demisexuality (Yule et al., 2017b), whereby there is the potential for sexual attraction to develop within the context of emotional intimacy, not all participants who discussed kink in these ways necessarily identified themselves as affiliated with this term. Despite this, participants described situations where their desire to enhance intimacy with kink was a challenge within some relationships:

In the past I have tried to convince partners to do a little light bondage with me and it has failed. Not participating in sex made it difficult to get my [allosexual] partners to want to put in the effort of educating themselves when all they wanted was plain old sex. [...] I mostly involve a little light bdsm in my relationship - constraints and tape, a few beginner sex toys, role play. I'm a curious person, and my partner is open to new things so it's likely I'll continue to increase the degree to which we involve new toys or experiment with severity. (Danielle, 20, aromantic)

Danielle seeks to add sensual enhancement to her relationship, but her partners are reported to be more interested in sexual enhancement. Danielle's curiosity and desire to experiment with BDSM demonstrated the difficulties of negotiating kink into an intimate dyadic relationship where one party's expectations and desires revolve around 'vanilla' sex. For Danielle, and some other BDSM practitioners, 'plain old sex' was not (all of) what she wanted in her relationship. The desire to experiment potentially had no limits and was utilised

to quench curiosity and create non-conventional forms of intimacy (Stiles & Clark, 2011; Sloan, 2015). The implication here is that if she were to participate in 'plain old sex' then she would be in a stronger position to persuade her partners to participate in BDSM in return. Being unable to offer such an exchange seemingly created a challenge for Danielle and her partners to satisfactorily fulfil each other's desires. Perhaps due to this lack of understanding from 'vanilla'-seeking partners, some participants felt an affinity to the BDSM community:

[The BDSM] community is very open and kind in regards to asexuality in a way that the 'mainstream' communities often are not. BDSM is often less about sexual gratification as it is about power-play, to have power over someone else in a consensual manner, or to give power away in a consensual manner. It's a huge matter of trust, which I find very admirable.

(EunYang, 23, greysexual)

As EunYang describes, BDSM and kink, when enacted with others, requires a mutual understanding of boundaries and an emphasis on dyadic trust. This union between asexual and BDSM communities allowed a space to express certain forms of intimacy through interaction with others without the need for sexual acts (Sloan, 2015). As the participants in this study who engaged in intimate activities demonstrated, kink can be used in relationships to strengthen bonds and make sensual connections between individuals in an intimate environment.

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore how asexual people who identified themselves as having a kink or fetish conceptualised, experienced, and negotiated these in relation to their asexual identity. The themes outlined above describe three different ways in which an asexual identity was understood and negotiated by these participants. For some, there was dissonance

in identifying as asexual while experiencing fantasies or sexual feelings or attractions. This created doubts and difficulties in managing their seemingly sensual (and perhaps sexual) self while occupying an asexual identity. For some of these participants, it seemed that their asexual identity had not always coincided easily alongside their kinks and fantasies, hence this sense of a lack of congruence between asexuality and kink and fantasies seemingly created a sense of not being 'asexual enough'. They reported that this initially caused them confusion and distress, which for some may have been somewhat resolved through the adoption of an asexual spectrum identity. Their adoption of spectrum identities, such as demisexual, may represent their attempts at a potential solution to alleviate what may be an apparent paradox between asexual identities and affiliation with kink and BDSM (conventionally understood as sexual and sometimes associated with sexual feelings or attraction, including by some participants). However, we noted that it was often difficult to ascertain whether participants were writing of their past or the present in their responses – and none explicitly indicated that their spectrum identities were a result of negotiating their identities in this way. Others were able to identify as asexual regardless of any kink or fetish they may possess, as the constructs of fantasy and reality were perceived as mutually exclusive and therefore sensual and sexual activities would not be desired in real-life and did not disrupt the validity of their asexual identity. Finally, some participants described how their kinks could be used as a sensual (rather than sexual) enhancement in their relationships. The results of the current study demonstrated some of the diversities and complexities of asexual identities and how participants navigated these. These findings also contribute to broader understandings of asexuality and kinks and fetishes, adding to previous findings in asexuality studies and gaining an insight of the experiences of asexual people that goes beyond mere definition (Yule et al., 2017a).

Whilst asexual literature (and sexuality research in general) makes note of romantic and demi identities within the LGBTQ community, the depth and breadth of such identities and their meanings are rarely explored beyond descriptive terms. Of the 48 participants who took part in this study, only four indicated that they identified exclusively as 'asexual' (see Table 1). The majority of the remaining 44 instead identified within a romantic or greysexual spectrum (AVEN, 2015). The findings of this study therefore offer insights into the experiences of asexual people who identify with an asexual spectrum identity, but not those who identify exclusively with an asexual identity. That said, the umbrella term of 'asexual' can be viewed as 'a common point of identification rather than constituting a shared identity per se' (Carrigan, 2011, p. 467), suggesting that with such a range of asexual spectrum identities emerging from the community (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2015), exclusively 'asexual' people could be a challenge to recruit and may not be representative of the majority of asexual people.

These findings reiterate not only that asexual people have varied experiences involving BDSM, kinks, and fetishes (Sloan, 2015; Yule et al., 2017a), but that their knowledge of asexuality and sensuality is developed and self-aware. It was clear this research topic was of interest to, and resonated with, many members of asexual communities. The ease of recruiting may have been aided by the first author declaring their insider status (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). However, others have noted the enthusiasm that asexual people have when asked to participate in research (see Dawson et al., 2016). Due to the unprecedented amount of interest in the topic, it was decided not to distribute the survey to any further online communities (such as AVEN) as it would have been unethical to advertise once enough data had been collected for the purposes of this study. Nonetheless, participants' demographic characteristics were similar to those of studies conducted using both AVEN and other sources (Dawson et al., 2016). It may be that recruiting online provides a specific picture of asexual

lives and identities and that these findings would not meaningfully transfer to participants who were less involved in online asexual communities, or less willing to participate in research, than those in this sample.

An online survey was an effective way in which to recruit participants and collect data and responses from participants were detailed and in-depth (see Terry & Braun, 2017). This may also be linked to the benefits of insider research where the first author’s disclosure of their insider status may have made participants feel that the researcher was trustworthy and in turn were willing to openly disclose their experiences (Bridges, 2001; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Perry et al., 2004). However, both researchers were situated as outsiders from our participants in relation to their kinks and fetishes. While this did not seem to serve as a notably apparent disadvantage, it did mean that our knowledge on this topic was based on self-education rather than lived experience. It is possible that our outsider perspective meant that we noticed aspects of the data which an insider could have taken for granted, or that we may have overlooked aspects of the data which might have been noticed by an insider (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

Implications and future research

Asexuality remains a somewhat under-researched topic despite a recent surge in academic interest (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2015; Vares, 2018). Further research which explores and differentiates between spectrum identities (e.g., demisexual, aromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, panromantic, greysexual, and so on; see Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2015) beyond the topics explored in this research could offer additional insights into the lived experiences of asexual people (Yule et al., 2017b). In light of the current study, it would appear that there are additional nuances and sub-identities worthy of further exploration, in particular the concept of autochorsissexualism (Bogaert,

2012). Whilst members of the asexual community have assimilated the term ‘autochorissexual’ within the asexual spectrum (Asexual Science, 2014; Asexuality Archive), only a handful of researchers have acknowledged or explored the term (Brotto & Yule, 2017; Zamboni & Madero, 2018), highlighting a gap in our knowledge of the diverse spectrum of asexual (sub)identities. Further exploration and awareness of autochorissexualism as part of the asexual spectrum could help the community become viewed as a diverse range of individuals rather than a singular archetypal person who ‘lacks sexual desire or attraction’. Broadening our knowledge and awareness of the breadth and depth of asexual identities could also offer insight into the best ways to support asexual people who may experience confusion or shame in experiencing arousal or attraction in atypical ways and help to disrupt binary understandings (allosexual/asexual) of sexuality and sensuality. Our findings indicate that further research into the ways in which asexual people feel a sense of inclusion/exclusion within asexual and LGBTQA+ communities would be worthy of exploration. Given previous findings which show that asexual identities may not be ‘master identities’ (Scott et al., 2016), it would also be useful to recruit participants from diverse demographic groups (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, disability, class, and so on), in order to consider the complexities of asexual people’s lives and experiences through a lens of intersectionality. For example, some activists and researchers have noted that online communities have often consisted of mainly White participants. Future research should focus on why this might be and explore the intersections of race and sexuality. This is a particularly important area given reports of Black asexual people feeling dismissed by AVEN members while searching for other Black members, and when they come out to peers (see Cerankowski, 2016; Gupta, 2018). Future inquiry could also add to the research (e.g., Sloan, 2015) which has recruited from within BDSM and kink communities (potentially including both asexual and sexual participants), in order to consider how asexuality is understood within such spaces. Such studies could offer

insight into how those who are allosexual experience engaging in BDSM, kink, and fetishes with those who are asexual or occupy asexual spectrum identities.

Finally, our results have implications for those working in educational and professional practice. Although asexual participants have reported that their asexuality was a non-issue during school, others told of how they felt isolated and lonely (Rothblum et al., 2019). School curricula could do more to include age-appropriate education so that young people can become knowledgeable about a range of identities, including asexuality and asexual sub-identities, to bring about wider understanding and acceptance. The application of the knowledge these findings bring could also be useful in therapeutic and clinical settings. Previous researchers have identified that some counsellors, therapists and sexuality professionals are open-minded and keen to help their clients navigate their sexual identity (Foster & Scherrer, 2014; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015). However, specialised training would help educate professionals about the diverse range of asexual identities that they may encounter. With this knowledge, the concept of a ‘kinky ace’ may become better understood which, in turn, could mean stronger support could be offered for asexual clients.

Conclusion

This study suggests that some asexual people have diverse knowledge of kinks and fantasy, and may embrace their desires, incorporating them into their identity and relationships. Future research should be utilised to expand our awareness and understanding of the nuances within specific asexual identities, and people’s experiences of them, in turn helping increase knowledge within and outside the community. This study offers a unique contribution to asexuality literature that combines both theoretical approaches with qualitative data, providing a narrative to the complex identities of asexual individuals with kinks and fetishes. It also offers professionals the opportunity to expand their knowledge of

the asexual community and in turn support 'kinky aces' negotiate and understand their identity.

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ⁱ Despite the success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels and films, BDSM practitioners have expressed concerns over the representations and portrayal of dominant / submissive relationships and BDSM activities within these (e.g., Steel, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Homoromantic refers to experiencing romantic (but not sexual) feelings towards people of the same gender (Colborne, 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Biromantic refers to experiencing romantic (but not sexual) attraction to more than one gender (Colborne, 2018).

^{iv} Panromantic refers to experiencing romantic (but not sexual) attraction to others, and this attraction is not limited by gender or sex (Yule et al., 2017b).

^v Dottie described themselves as aromantic in the demographic questionnaire and as demisexual when asked about additional terms to describe identity.