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Exploring Aromanticism Through an Online Qualitative Investigation With the Aromantic Community: "Freeing, Alienating, and Utterly Fantastic"

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore what aromanticism is, common misconceptions about this identity, and the experiences people have connecting with an aromantic identity. *Methods:* An online, international open-ended survey with a convenience sample of aromantic individuals ($N = 1642$) analyzed with thematic analysis. *Results:* To identify as aromantic involves a spectrum of experiences with romance commonly tied to experiencing stigma. Connecting with an aromantic identity allows for a greater understanding of the self and a connection to a community. *Conclusions:* Future research is needed to explore the experiences and perspectives of this community to gather better understanding of their needs and how to prevent/limit stigmatizing experiences.

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Introduction

Romantic love has been widely discussed in scholarly works; however, some have found it difficult to define and measure (Tobore, 2020). One theoretical model of love is Sternberg's triangular theory of love which explicates love as involving (1) intimacy, (2) passion, and (3) commitment (Sternberg, 1997). Quantitative work suggests these factors are highly correlated and overlap and meaningfully distinguishing between these factors can be hard (Acker & Davis, 1992; Whitley, 1993). Other approaches adopt a biological lens and view the experience of romantic love as vital to maintaining reproduction (Fisher et al., 2006). Meta-analyses investigating the measurement of love in published articles identify that love can involve a variety of affective and behavioral states, such as companionship, obsession, passion, intimacy, and commitment (Graham, 2010; Masuda, 2003). Importantly, for those who experience romantic love, the implicated emotions and feelings fluctuate. For example, work by Hatfield et al. (2008) identified that companionate and passionate love diminishes over time. The experience of love is tethered to culture and in Western societies love is traditionally mononormative—that is, emphasizing romantic connection with only one other (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023; Moors et al., 2021). Moreover, it is anchored in a hierarchy of relationship types, where heterosexual marriage occupies the most valued position (Lavender-Stott, 2023).

One factor important in conceptualizations of romantic love is *attraction* (Tobore, 2020). Attraction within the context of romantic love is often described as sexual attraction. For example, conceptualizations and theoretical perspectives of romantic love often integrate the presumption of sexual attraction or sexual experiences to functionally distinguish it from other forms of love (e.g. parental love) (Bode & Kushnick, 2021; Collins et al., 2009; Sternberg, 1997). Other literature points to the nuanced nature of sexual attraction as being important in romantic partner selection (Lamy, 2020).

Some theoretical positions advocate for the disentanglement of sexual and romantic attraction.

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Diamond's Biobehavioral model (Diamond, 2003) posits that romance and sexual attraction are functionally independent, suggesting they originate from differing social-behavioral systems. A further theory often used to describe romantic vs. sexual attraction is the Split-Attraction Model (SAM) (Mixer, 2018; The Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2022). This model is often used within aromantic/asexual communities; however, to date, it has not been validated empirically. The SAM suggests that romantic and sexual attractions can be *distinct* and offers language to help label identities separate from sexual attraction—such as homoromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic, and aromantic (orthogonal to homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual). Both these models support the theory that one important form of attraction within the umbrella of romantic love is romantic attraction.

Work by Hammack et al. (2018) posits that it is essential for research exploring relationships to meaningfully explore and validate other forms of intimacy and romance that may not involve attraction, such as aromanticism. The term "aromantic" is an identity term used as either an umbrella term for people who experience varying relationships with romantic attraction (also referred to as Aromatic-Spectrum or "Aro-spec") or as an individual term used to describe someone who experiences little to no romantic attraction (AUREA, 2021b). It is not as simple to dichotomize between experiencing or not experiencing romantic attraction, as many Aro-spec folks have broad perspectives toward romance (often ranging between repulsion, lack of interest, and confusion), or experience romantic attraction under specific conditions (AUREA, 2021b). In juxtaposition to aromantic is *alloromantic*—a term for people who experience and desire a relationship with romance that aligns with the normative traditional societal constructs of romantic love and attraction (AUREA, 2021b). Aromanticism has also been considered under different political and feminist lenses, including relationship anarchy (Gómez, 2018), and as a form of political celibacy that challenges "compulsory sexuality" (Przybylo, 2019).

Traditional academic literature often erroneously embeds aromanticism as a feature of asexuality, rather than as an independent identity. For example, literature by Hall and Knox (2022) describing the romantic behavior of asexual peoples has not considered aromanticism as a separate identity. Research by Antonsen et al. (2020) seeking to delineate the demographic and psychological differences between aromantic and romantic asexual found that only 25% of asexual individuals were aromantic, a finding consistent with other literature exploring relational identities among asexual individuals (Zheng & Su, 2018). However, Antonsen et al. (2020) suggest that aromantic and alloromantic asexual identities differ in sexual desire and behaviors. Therefore, the common representation of aromanticism in scholarly work as a component of asexuality limits understanding of the nuanced differences between these identities.

This common representation is problematic, considering research shows significant differences in the experiences of aromantic and alloromantic asexual individuals. For example, a study exploring differences in attachment style and sexual relationships among asexual individuals showed that aromantic people had significantly higher avoidance attachment styles and were less likely to be sexually active or desire romantic relationships (with, or without, sexual intimacy) (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). Other research has shown that aromantic asexuals have significantly less sexual desire and have engaged in fewer sexually coded behaviors (Antonsen et al., 2020). This suggests that aromanticism may be a unique contributor to comfort and engagement in certain sexual behaviors. However, by grounding aromanticism in the context of asexuality, the full influence of aromanticism on the lives of aromantic people has not been explored. Therefore, future research is necessary to appropriately differentiate one from the other to determine each identity's unique contribution to behavioral outcomes.

Underpinning traditional notions of romantic attraction or "romantic love" is the expectation that it is something desired by everyone, and it will improve your quality of life. This concept has been referred to as *amatonormativity* (Brake, 2012). Within their work, Brake (2012) describes how amatonormativity is reinforced by the legal protection of romantic relationships (i.e., marriage) at the exclusion of other forms of connections, such as friendships, polyamorous relationships, and queer–platonic relationships. This pressure devalues non-romantic

relationships and perpetuates social narratives that marriage, and romantic relationships, should be expected and valued higher than other forms of companionship (Brake, 2012). Amatonormativity also has wide implications for all people in society. For example, research has shown that feeling unhappy in a marriage can contribute to lower life satisfaction, overall health, and self-esteem compared to those who are unmarried (Hawkins & Booth., 2005). In the context of domestic violence, a fear of being alone has also been identified as a barrier to help-seeking (Alvarez et al., 2021). Finally, the pressure to desire marriage has been referred to by some as social control and linked with lower self-esteem and higher negative affect (Mann, 2011). This indicates that pressures to engage in amatonormative behaviors—such as pursuing or remaining in a marriage—may sustain potentially abusive power structures, further impacting an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

These socially and legally embedded amatonormative expectations leave aromantic people vulnerable to the experience of stigma by society. This stigma may function as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, plus additional gender, sexual, and romantic identities) community, where *experienced stigma* is high (Meyer et al., 2021). LGBTQIA+ literature often describes experienced stigma as a form of minority stress based on Minority Stress Theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003). Both conceptualisations consistently highlight the deleterious impact of experienced stigma for LGBTQIA + people (Ayhan et al. 2019; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; White Hughto et al., 2015). Aromantic individuals may be further socially disenfranchized as their relationships often do not fit within the expected and legally endorsed mold of romantic love or relationships (Brake, 2012). Therefore, an exploration into their experiences of stigma is necessary to delineate pathways to improved support for aromantic and romantically diverse people.

To date, there is a paucity of empirical evidence exploring aromanticism. Recent research by Tessler (2023a) identifies how many aromantic men must reconcile stereotypes that intersect between gender and amatonormativity—such as being a "fuckboy" for not experiencing romantic attraction. Other research (Tessler, 2023b) explores the nuanced ways that aromantic identities disentangle amatonormative relationship formation. Outside of this work, however, much of the available work which offers useful insight into this community's experiences comes from online community surveys (often conducted through the social media platform Tumblr and not published in empirical journals). One of these community-driven investigations found that many aromantic people considered their romantic identity to be of greater value in their lives compared to their gender or sexual identities (Hella-Aro, 2019). Others identified that aromantic people experience high levels of discrimination due to their identities (Aro-Neir, 2019; Arson, 2020). A large online survey by the Aromantic-spectrum Union for Recognition, Education, and Advocacy (AUREA) suggests that many aromantic people have found large online aromantic communities with which they frequently engage (AUREA, 2021a). Community evidence also suggests that the aromantic community is becoming increasingly visible and determined to have their experiences heard. Empirical research is necessary to capture the experiences of the aromantic community and articulate them within scholarly research to further advance what is known about this community.

The current study

The aim of this investigation was, in partnership with members of the aromantic community, to explore the attitudes and perspectives of aromantic people and learn how their identity influences their lives. Coming from a wider study exploring aromanticism (AroUQ), this investigation sought to understand what it means to be aromantic, guided by three research questions:

1. How do aromantic individuals conceptualize aromanticism?
2. What perceived stigma do aromantic individuals describe?
3. What are the experiences aromantic people have connecting with an aromantic identity?

Methods

Community-based research partnership and researcher positionality

This project was conceived based on the existing community partnership between The University

of Queensland and investigators from AUREA (a global aromantic community organization) and is underpinned by the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Israel et al., 2005, 2010). In line with CBPR, the community was meaningfully engaged in every step of the research (including the design of research questions, data collection, thematic analysis, and presentation of results). The specific areas explored in this study were based on areas of importance identified and informed by the lived experience of the aromantic researchers (AC and UCB) partnering in this study and their community involvement through AUREA. Consultation with aromantic research team members led to the development of the five key areas to explore: Define, Shine, Discrimination, Barriers, and Where Next? These domains were explored using a combination of closed "yes/no" items and open-ended questions. See Table 1 for a description and examples of open-ended questions for the survey sections. Findings reported in this paper come primarily from four open-ended questions within the define, discrimination, and shine sections (Table 2). Other areas of the study are being analyzed for future publications.

This research intentionally blends a mix of insider and outsider research perspectives. Four authors—including the lead—identify as alloromantic (JF, MM, TB, and JD), and the remaining as aromantic (AC and UCB). Insider and outsider roles offer pragmatic benefits and challenges in the design, interpretation, and presentation of research involving communities (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Levy, 2013). For example, insider perspectives offer unique insight into the challenges a community may experience, but there may be concerns around presenting data that only speaks favorably toward communities. Vice versa, outsider perspectives may present a less-biased perspective toward data analysis but may not be able to properly appreciate the nuanced community perspectives. The blend of perspectives, however, allowed for group deliberation and reflection on the vantage point from which data was interpreted and presented—allowing for a balanced and comprehensive analysis.

Participants, recruitment, data collection

This project sought to recruit a convenience sample of individuals from around the world who self-identified as being any identity outside of alloromantic and over the age of 16 years. The involvement of young people under 18 years themselves was considered appropriate and essential by the community consulted. Based on the premise that young people aged 16 years and over generally have sufficient age, maturity, and understanding to provide autonomous informed consent (Balen et al., 2006) participants under the age of 18 were not required to attain parental

Table 1. Overview of study categories in the AroUQ survey.

Define	This section explored how aromantic individuals defined their identity. An example item is "In your own words what is aromanticism?"
Discrimination	This section explored the discrimination that aromantic individuals may or may not experience. An example item is "Have you experienced prejudice from other people within the LGBTQIA+ queer/rainbow community based on your aromantic identity?"
Barriers	This section explored barriers that aromantic individuals may or may not identify as intruding on how they live their lives. An example item is "Do you feel that amatonormativity is a barrier to how you express yourself/exist in the world?"
Shine	This section explored the positives of identifying as aromantic. An example item is "Does connecting with your aromantic identity help you understand/navigate your life?"
Where next?	This section explores which areas of future research are identified by the aromantic community as the most important. An example item is "Is there anything you would like researchers to focus on next?"

Table 2. Survey questions included in the analysis and respondents.

Survey section	Questions *n* (%)	n (%)
Define	1) How do you define aromanticism? [open text] 1589 (96.7%)	
	2) Aromanticism is sometimes assumed to be under the asexual label - Do you agree or disagree with this? [closed] 1627 (99.0%)	
	• Yes [open text] 162 (10.0%)	
	• No [open text] 1464 (90.0%)	
Discrimination	3) What are the biggest misconceptions around aromanticism? [open text] 1279 (77.9%)	
Shine	4) Do you find that connecting with your aromantic identity has helped you to better understand/navigate your life? [closed] 1251 (76.1%)	
	• Yes [open text] 1188 (95.0%)	
	• No [open text] 63 (5.0%)	

Notes. Percentages for yes/no questions pertain to respondents to that question and not the whole sample ($N = 1{,}642$).

consent. Study information and links to complete an online survey were circulated through AUREA's social media networks and were later re-shared via participants to their networks. Recruitment was initially set to be open for 3 months with a target sample size of approximately 500 participants; however, the survey was closed after 2 days when 2052 responses were recorded. Ethical approval for the study was provided by The University of Queensland (2021/HE001760).

Participants completed an anonymous online survey hosted via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2022). After providing informed consent, participants completed a series of demographic items, and then completed the full survey. See Appendix 1 for an overview of what questions were asked, and the order they were presented in. Questions involved a variety of yes/no items linked to a series of open-ended questions designed to allow free-text responses describing the experience of being aromantic. To encourage participants to provide longer responses with additional context and ultimately a more detailed narrative, free-text response categories were not limited in their size (Israel, 2010). Participants were allowed to skip any question and could move back and forth between questions. As well, participants were welcome to exit the study at any time. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants received no remuneration for their time.

Data analytical procedures

Descriptive analysis was performed on "yes/no" questions, with frequencies reported in-text to add supplementary context to the thematic analysis conducted on the related open-ended questions. An inductive thematic analysis procedure was used in line with reflexive thematic analysis procedures described in Braun and Clarke (2012). These analyses were conducted manually with Nvivo 12 Software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020) used to store the data and create codes. Unique to reflexive thematic analysis is the role of the researcher as an active participant and interpreter of the data, as well as the flexible and dynamic nature of analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). An inductive approach was used given its efficacy in exploring new areas of research (Clarke & Braun, 2017), such as the experiences of the aromantic community. While the approach was primarily inductive, the research questions were used deductively to ensure themes were relevant to the research questions. However, in this analysis, no other theoretical vantage points were used to restrain the reflective process. Additionally, the decision was made to focus on each individual response as the unit of analysis as understanding individual perspectives best met the aims of the thematic analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). This approach further helps integrate the individual narratives of the participants to ensure themes are an accumulation of a range of experiences.

Braun and Clarke (2012) describe an iterative six-step procedure that was used to structure this thematic analysis. First, the lead author (JF—who identifies as alloromantic) read participant responses. This data was read and re-read to promote familiarization with the data (Step 1). Responses were then re-read, and a series of codes were created to categorize data into specific areas (Step 2). Following this, these codes were grouped based on their latent or semantic meaning—with predominant focus on semantic meaning as the interpretation developed. This dual approach within a reflexive thematic analytical approach ensures the participant's voice, as well as the researcher as an active participant, are considered and integrated into the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Byrne, 2022). These codes then formed around central organizing principles (Step 3). These groupings were then discussed as a whole group and continually reviewed through group deliberation (Step 4). Once finalized, these themes were named and defined (Step 5). Finally, they were articulated into the format presented in this article (Step 6).

As stated previously, the balance of insider and outsider research perspectives supported a balanced, comprehensive thematic analysis. To facilitate this, shared understanding of the data to inform the analysis was promoted between insider and outsider team members through processes of reflection. This included understanding and reflecting on the ways that internal biases may be influencing how the data are perceived. Furthermore, inclusion of community members

ensured that the presentation of results was affirming (e.g. they did not *invalidate* aromantic identities or use derogatory language) but was simultaneously grounded in the experiences of participants. All authors agreed upon the final presentation of the results. While survey questions guided analysis, the thematic analysis identified a more complex thematic structure and, therefore, differs from the sequence of questions posed to participants.

Results

Participant demographics

An initial sample of 2,052 responses was recorded. Surveys were included and analyzed if at least one of the open-ended items was completed; 363 were excluded as they did not meet inclusion criteria. A further 47 surveys were excluded as participants did not report aromantic or aro-spec identity. This left a final sample of 1,642 participants. Generally, most participants were from the United States of America (USA, 46.3%), aged between 16 and 25 years (71.1%), and identified as asexual (59.9%). However, as reported in Table 3, there was a wide representation of ages, genders, sexual orientations, and romantic orientations underneath the aromantic umbrella. Almost 60% of participants had been identifying as aromantic between 1 and 5 years, and only 15.1% were out entirely as aromantic.

Our analysis identified three key themes. Theme 1 described how aromanticism was considered by participants as being a broad range of experiences with romantic attraction and romantic relationships. Theme 2 described the perceived stigma that aromantic people experience. Theme 3 explored the profound impact that identifying as aromantic had on the lives of aromantic individuals.

Table 3. Demographic information for included sample.

	N (%)
Area of residence ($n = 1617$)	
USA	760 (46.3)
Canada	117 (7.1)
Other North American countries	14 (0.9)
South America	18 (1.1)
United Kingdom	140 (8.5)
Europe	328 (20.0)
Australia/New Zealand	181 (11.0)
Asia	54 (3.3)
Africa	5 (0.3)
Gender ($n = 1641$)	
Cisgender female	507 (30.9)
Cisgender male	74 (4.5)
Transgender male	148 (9.0)
Transgender female	10 (0.6)
Non-binary	538 (32.8)
Intersex	0 (0.0)
Prefer to not to say	37 (2.3)
Multiple gender identities	71 (4.3)
No label/No gender identity	13 (0.8)
Questioning/Unsure	26 (1.6)
Other	217 (13.2)
Sexual identity ($n = 1640$)	
Heterosexual	32 (2.0)
Lesbian	39 (2.4)
Gay	39 (2.4)
Bisexual	144 (8.8)
Asexual	982 (59.9)
Queer	123 (7.5)
Questioning/Unsure	29 (1.8)
Pansexual	42 (2.6)
"I don't label my sexual identity"	73 (4.5)
Prefer not to say	3 (0.2)
Multiple sexual identities	72 (4.4)
No sexual identity	3 (0.2)
Other	59 (3.6)
Romantic identity ($n = 1640$)	
Alloromantic	3 (0.2)
Aromantic	1067 (65.0)
Aro-Spec	233 (14.2)
Greyromantic	119 (7.2)
Demiromantic	134 (8.2)
Multiple romantic identities	28 (1.7)
No label	3 (0.2)
Questioning/unsure	8 (0.5)
Other	45 (2.7)
Out as aromantic ($n = 1640$)	
Entirely	247 (5.1)
Partially out to some	695 (42.4)
Partially out to select few	506 (30.9)
I am not out to anyone	113 (6.9)
Particularly out to one select person	79 (4.8)
How many years identifying as aromantic ($n = 1642$)	
Less than a year ago	324 (19.7)
A full year to 2 years ago	436 (26.6)
3–5 years ago	482 (29.4)
6+ years ago	284 (17.3)
Still questioning	65 (4.0)
Unsure/Can't remember	51 (3.1)

Note. Total $N = 1642$; age ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 6.41$).

Theme 1 – Aromanticism is a spectrum of experiences, but WTF is love?

For some respondents, "aromantic" was a term used to describe a singular identity that usually involved the absence of romantic attraction commonly operationalized as not needing or desiring romantic experiences. As one participant (19-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic individual from Germany) shared, they have "never had a desire to enter into a relationship," and "a romantic relationship is not something I strive for."

However, there was also an acknowledgement that to be aromantic is a wider experience than simply an absence of romantic attraction. One

person (24-year-old, cisgender female, lesbian, aromantic from the United Kingdom) described their experiences of developing a "crush" as sounding like "they're catching an illness." For others, there was a sense of confusion around romantic relationships, both why people feel the need to engage in set socially normative romantic behaviors, described by one participant (28-year-old, cisgender male, asexual, aromantic from Russia) such as "having dates, gifting flowers, French-kissing … and having heart problems," and simply not understanding the purpose of romance altogether. Being repulsed by romance was also a commonly reported experience, as well as fluctuating and conditional experiences of romance.

When you listen to all those songs about romantic love, you wonder if people really feel that way that they would let people ruin them. Would they really let another person make them their own? These contracts don't seem fair. When I think that they might mean it, it makes me flinch. 27-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic individual from the Philippines.

For some, their aromantic identity was larger than themselves and demonstrated a pivot away from societal constructs that restrict our conceptualization of romance and relationships:

For me it's that not only that I don't experience romantic attraction, it's also that I don't agree with the societal script of romance and would like to opt out of the traditional structure altogether. 25-year-old, non-binary, dyke, aromantic from The United Kingdom

When asked if aromanticism and asexuality should not be considered "underneath" the asexual label (through a yes/no question with open-text options), the vast majority of the current sample (90.3%, 1464/1627) believed that they should not be considered under the same identity. As one participant shared:

I am aroace so while for me the two are intrinsically intertwined, I feel that both are separate but connected but should be respected as their own separate terms and experiences. 18-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic, queer individual from England.

This is in recognition of the fact that romantic attraction does not necessarily influence or preclude people from other forms of attraction:

You can still fall in love platonically with your friends, or your pets, or even esthetically for a really pretty sunset or whatever else! It's just not romantic. 26 year old, transgender male, asexual, aromantic, aro-ace bi, individual from the USA

For individuals who felt that aromantic should be considered underneath the asexual umbrella, this was often due to its convenience for helping people understand what an aromantic identity may look like.

While two are describing different types of attraction, the use of Asexual as an umbrella term can be helpful for people who haven't yet learned the nuances between the two. 25-year-old, transmasculine/non-binary, queer/pansexual, aromantic/greyromantic/demiromantic individual from the USA

Others felt that there was no reason at all to distinguish between romantic and sexual identities:

Just the same as heteroromanticism is assumed to be under the heterosexual label, for example, I don't see why aromantic/asexual should get a separate treatment.19-year-old, cisgender female, asexual, aromantic individual from Canada

Some participants described using theoretical models to help them understand their identities, such as the split attraction model (SAM), though many simultaneously acknowledged that these models are not applicable to everyone.

I acknowledge the split attraction model (SAM) for myself and others. I understand that not everyone uses the SAM, but I think it is necessary to understand everyone best. 37-year-old cisgender female, asexual, aromantic, queer pan-oriented ace individual from the USA.

For some participants, it was hard to describe what aromanticism was as it was already hard to describe what it means to be romantic, having "never been in love." As many participants shared, the idea of romance is "so nebulous, isn't it?" and "WTF is romance." Many participants relied on describing a disinterest, confusion, or repulsion toward romantically coded behaviors (e.g. hugging and kissing) to define and contextualize their aromantic identities. Although it should be reaffirmed that many other aromantic individuals reported engaging in these romantically coded behaviors in their platonic relationships—the overlap of which caused frustration for some participants. Despite uncertainty around

what romance is and how it can help understand an aromantic identity, for one participant (31-year-old cisgender male, asexual, aromantic, aegosexual, hetero-oriented aroace from The United Kingdom), this did not matter, as holding an aromantic identity was "useful in conveying my certainty that I do not want a romantic relationship."

Theme 2: Amatonormativity is bullshit

Participants described how amatonormative expectations formed a harmful lens through which aromantic people were judged. This perceived stigma often centralized around aromantic people being unable to feel any love and were someone to be pitied—or at worse, feared. The outcomes of this are often negative for aromantic people, with one participant (25-year-old non-binary, asexual, queer, aromantic, quioromantic, aegosexual from Canada) describing that "Loveless Aros are really bearing the worst of society's amatonormative bullshit."

It's mostly the whole "you need love to be human" thing. I'm not personally a "loveless" aro but some people are and frankly its very hurtful to imply that they're less than human. 19-year-old, bigender, bisexual, aromantic, cupioromantic individual from the USA

Fuelled by the perspective that it is wrong to not experience romantic love in an amatonormative way, many aromantic people perceive that there is a strong misconception that they are bad people. Another common point raised was the perception that they are feelingless and incapable of feeling any love at all.

That we're not actually oppressed or that we're basically straight or that we're incapable of love and therefore horrible people. 18-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic, queer individual from England.

Perhaps influenced by a misunderstanding of aromanticism and dominance of amatonormativity, many aromantic people felt that they were perceived to be immature, attention-seeking, selfish or cruel, having commitment issues, or missing something that made them human. One participant described how such misunderstanding led to the association of aromanticism with being sexual predators.

That aromantic people are sexual predators, or that we're inherently more sexual people than individuals who are not aromantic. 20-year-old, transgender male, gay, greyromantic individual from the USA

Because of an amatonormativite society, there is a rhetoric that many aromantic people are missing out on a key part of life—meaning they are "sad," "unfulfilled," and "lonely."

I have also seen people infantilize aromantics and devalue our quality of life, like it would be better to be dead than be a single and aromantic adult. 25-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic individual from The USA

These stigmatized perceptions seem to also suggest that aromantic people must be missing out on love altogether and that aromantic people must lack the ability to "care" for another person, and potentially have "commitment issues." As multiple participants articulated, however, this is simply not true for many people.

That we cannot experience friendship. I lack romantic attraction, but that does not mean I'm incapable of loving my friends … I'm not "missing a partner in my life," I never wanted one to begin with. That does not make me or my life "incomplete." Do not be sad for me, I'm very happy on my own:). 23-year-old cisgender female, no sexual identity, aromantic individual from The Netherlands

Many participants also shared that they often heard the "right person" narrative in response to their identity.

That it's normal [to not want romance], everyone feels that way until they meet the right person. 26-year-old, Cisgender female, queer, greyromantic individual from the USA

Many aromantic individuals described being told that they had a mental illness or were victims of trauma or bad relationships and that their aromanticism could cured so they can "feel again."

Things like "Aromantics are just mentally ill and that's why they can't feel anything, meaning you can fix them" which is both ableist and aphobic. 20-year-old, non-binary, trans guy, asexual, aro-spec individual from Germany.

We're traumatized, not to say people who are both arospec and traumatized aren't valid, but not everyone has trauma they need to "get over"

to no longer be aromantic. 21-year-old, non-binary, asexual, grey-romantic individual from the USA

Important to recognize was that for some, trauma may be connected to their aromantic identity. As one participant described, the term "caedromantic" (aromanticism caused by trauma) is used to describe someone who feels their aromantic identity is attributed to experiences of trauma.

As an aromantic person, I feel that I somewhat identify with the term caedromantic (aromanticism caused by trauma). Although, I'm not sure to what extent trauma caused my asexuality and aromanticism. 39-year-old, cisgender female, asexual, aromantic, non-partnering individual from the USA

Theme 3: Connecting with your aromantic identity is powerful

Many describe how connecting with an aromantic identity was a turning point to no longer doing things they did not want to do. They no longer felt they needed to prove that they were not broken:

Before I identified as aro, I put myself in an unhappy relationship because I felt it was expected of me and I didn't understand my own feelings. Now I better understand my romantic feelings (or rather, lack thereof) and I am unlikely to make that mistake again. 21-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic, oriented ace lesbian individual from the USA

Connecting with their aromantic identity, however, allowed for complete rejection of amatonormativity and the re-definition of romantic relationships altogether. This re-definition is a core element of aromanticism, as many aromantic people hold and cherish intimate relationships:

I have deep love for family and friends (including friends I engage with sexually) but have never felt that nebulous "romantic love." 23-year-old cisgender male, no sexual identity, aromantic individual from The United Kingdom

A great share of participants felt that connecting with their aromantic identity helped them better navigate their lives. Many folks described how "powerful" it felt to discover their aromantic identity, as it was a catalyst for understanding their thoughts and feelings and accepting themselves for who they were. There was relief in no longer having to comply with societal norms around romance and how romance is required to "look," as one participant shared:

When I finally admitted to myself that I was aromantic, I was able to let go of some pretty heavy expectations I had for myself. I could never picture myself in a relationship before learning about aromanticism, and it was like a sigh of relief when I finally learned that I don't have to! 23-year-old, non-binary, asexual, aromantic individual from the USA

The pressures of amatonormativity for aromantic people can be intense, and as one participant shared, connecting with their identity, and rejecting amatonormativity "was like a breath of air when I was suffocating. I felt at ease for the first time."

One participant shared how their identity permitted them to live their lives without the worry of missing certain "milestones," and another shared that their life felt "complete" without things that wider society deemed to be "important."

Connecting with their aromantic identity was affirming for aromantic people and helped them understand that they were not broken:

After finding myself, I felt less broken. I was so happy to have a word to describe myself and other people who feel like me I can be in community with. 20-year-old, non-binary, bisexual, aromantic, polyamorous/nonamarous individual from the USA

It was also a moment of "self-growth" and for many, it helped them understand their past experiences, such as their "childhood" or past relationships.

Oh, heavens yes. For one, I completely jettisoned the lingering feeling that I had to find a partner to be "complete." I know what I want, and I'm doing it now… My life makes so much more sense now that I know! 36-year-old, cisgender female, asexual, aromantic individual from the USA

There was a real sense that understanding their aromantic identity helped some people regain control over their lives. Whether this be through "sorting priorities" or being able to "take the

wheel." As one participant (23-year-old cisgender female, heterosexual, aromantic individual from Canada) described, finding their aromantic identity opened "so many possibilities," and allowed them to "pursue what I truly want, rather than what I'm 'supposed' to."

While there was an emphasis placed on how their identities helped aromantic people find themselves, it also helped them discover each other. For some, there was an experience that through this community connection, they realized that they were "not alone," and that a community helped them feel safe. Connection with the community also allowed for greater discussion and understanding around important topics and allowed them to explore their own "identity and boundaries." Some enjoyed being able to engage in reciprocal "support" with members of their community, which was also noted by one participant who felt that finding other examples of people just like them "helped" them along their journey. Finally, for one participant (17-year-old demigirl, asexual, aromantic individual from Canada), their community connection allowed them to identify more broadly with the "queer community" allowing them to reflect and explore their gender.

The online community appears to be particularly prominent for aromantic individuals as it is an opportunity for aromantic individuals to connect:

I don't really know any other aro people in real life, having the right language means I can see other people online who have similar experiences. 21-year-old, cisgender female, no sexual identity, aromantic from Australia

And for others, this connection meant they were able to fully accept my identity and realize I am not alone in my experiences. 29-year-old, cisgender female, asexual, aromantic individual from Canada.

Beyond their community, connecting with their identity allowed aromantic individuals to connect with and understand other people in their lives. For some, this meant that they were a "better friend, partner, and person." It also helped others set boundaries and expectations around relationships, as they understood they could not "cater" to romantic feelings. Another person spoke about how connecting with their aromantic identity led to commitment: "[I was] able to commit truly, finally, after 15 years of figuring Us out, to the love of my life using labels we understand and feel right" 24-year-old, bigender/gender-fluid between male and female, queer, aro-spec with fluctuating identity labels from the USA.

In helping them relate to others, understanding their aromantic identity meant that they were better at distinguishing attraction, something which was previously quite confusing:

When I thought it was mandatory to have romantic feelings, I mistook most of my friendships as crushes and nearly fudged some relationships because of it. Knowing I'm aromantic makes me feel so much less confused about how I feel about the people around me. 16-year-old, transgender male, questioning, aromantic who experiences queer-platonic attraction from the USA

Finally, connecting with an aromantic identity gave aromantic people a language to explain themselves to others. This was useful at a broader sense to help explain what their identity means and communicate their needs:

I feel the word/identity has giving me the vocabulary and sense of legitimacy needed to explain it to people and challenge amatonormativity. Being able to label how I felt as aromantic helps explain that this is not a unique phenomenon. 19-year-old, cisgender female, asexual, aromantic individual from Canada.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to explore how aromantic individuals conceptualize their identities, experience stigma, and the impact of connecting with their identity. Overall, our findings suggest that to be aromantic is a diverse experience and the label itself means different things to different people. Connecting with this identity, for some, can be an affirming, life-changing experience.

What is aromanticism?

How aromantic individuals define aromanticism, as described in this paper, makes salient the two distinct ways aromanticism can be conceptualized. First, aromantic can be a singular term

describing a lack of romantic attraction. Second, aromantic can be an umbrella term describing a broad range of unique relationships with romantic attraction which differ from societally accepted forms of romantic attraction (which is often referred to as Aro-spec, AUREA, 2021a). As described in our results, several unique labels may be applied to these forms of attraction—such as greyromantic or demiromantic. A common thread running through both these conceptualizations is that the shape and form of romantic attraction varies between individuals. For example, some may have no interest in romance, others feel primarily repulsion or confusion, and some may have interest and feel romantic emotion under specific conditions. It is also important to acknowledge that some aromantic people may experience romantic attraction, but do not desire romantic relationships in a way that aligns with the socially prescribed models of how romantic relationships should look like. These definitions and experiences align with the complexity of identities commonly accepted within the aromantic community and endorsed in a community survey of nearly 10,000 aromantic individuals from around the world (AUREA, 2021a).

Our findings highlight that aromantic people wish for aromanticism not to be considered a part of asexuality—a practice that has dominated contemporary literature (Antonsen et al. 2020; Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022; Clark & Zimmerman, 2022; Hall & Knox, 2022; Zheng & Su, 2018). Many participants clarified the distinction between their sexual identity and romantic identity and highlighted that though they may be connected for some, they should be considered independently as unique contributors to an individual's identity and experience. This aligns with a previous aromantic community survey that showed 72% of the sample did not identify with asexual terminology (AUREA, 2021a). In combination with our findings, this suggests that a tendency to conflate and describe these identities as the same or linked may be to the disadvantage of a significant portion of the aromantic community. Therefore, in alignment with the proposed paradigm shift by Hammack (2018), research that validates aromantic intimacy through solidifying its independence from asexuality should be a priority for future research.

Research has identified that within LGBTQIA + contexts, cultural norms, values, and practices can influence connection and the experience of identity. For example, qualitative research by Sun et al. (2020) identified how cultural factors such as filial piety and pressures to have a heterosexual marriage was a source of minority stress of men-who-have-sex-with-men living in China. This led to so some concealing their identity or "performing" masculine acts to avoid discrimination, and a later quantitative study identified the deleterious mental health impact of these culturally related pressures (Sun et al., 2021). The current paper did not thoroughly explore the impact of culture and aromantic experiences. We argue however that similar cultural pressures (e.g., a pressure to engage in amatonormative behaviors such as heterosexual marriage as to show respect for family members as identified in Sun et al. 2020) may have a unique impact on the experience of aromanticism as they do sexual attraction. However, future research exploring this is necessary.

The impact of discrimination and perceived stigma

Participants described a range of harmful, discriminatory, and prejudiced experiences that were motivated by an amatonormative society. This includes being described as set to live an unhappy life as a person in nontraditional relationships (including being single) and being overall less human than people who express and feel what is considered traditional romantic love and attraction. This experience of stigma can be extremely damaging for aromantic people and highlights the importance of cultivating awareness around what it means to be aromantic and pushing against amatonormative expectations. This pushback is important considering that many of our participants felt empowered by their identity. In turn, this identity empowerment might help support wellbeing by fostering community connection and resilience (Wagaman, 2016).

Reflecting on research into the wider LGBTQIA + community; stigma, discrimination, and misconceptions continue to have a deleterious impact on people of diverse sexuality and gender identities (Kelleher, 2009). Whilst no studies have considered how individuals perceive

aromantic people, other literature regarding relationship status indicate that many consider being single (one way that aromanticism can "look"), a failure or due to internal deficits – such as being less physically attractive, neurotic, less agreeable, or being less responsible (Conley & Collins, 2002; Greitemeyer, 2009). This deficit rhetoric aligns with how our participants described being treated due to their identity – such as being viewed as victims of trauma, being unwilling to commit, and potentially a predator. The dissonance between external perceptions vs. actual experiences of not being in a romantic relationship has been noted in wider literature. For example, research by Greitemeyer (2009) highlighted that single individuals rated their wellbeing significantly higher than how others perceived they would due to being non-partnered. Adamczyk and Segrin (2015) found similar results and emphasize that whilst society may assume that single people have poorer wellbeing, literature and lived experience suggests that this is not true.

Our research suggests that aromantic people may experience two distinct forms of stigma connected to their aromantic identity. First, they may experience stigma as part of being a member of the LGBTQIA + community—often referred to as minority stressors (Kelleher, 2009; Meyer, 2003). However, our participants described also experiencing specific forms of stigma tied to their romantic identity due to amatonormative expectations regarding romantic partnerships. Scholarly work identifies the dangerous sequela stemming from experiencing stigma—including the development of internalized stigma and anticipated stigma (Gronholm et al. 2017; Hing & Russell, 2017). Within the LGBTQIA + context, high levels of internalized stigma have been identified as a predictor of poorer mental health outcomes (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). High levels of anticipated stigma have also caused others to conceal their identities and limited their access to essential services, such as healthcare (Pachankis et al. 2020; Whitehead et al. 2016). These forms of stigma can co-occur, potentially creating a dangerous vacuum where many aromantic people experience distress from external and internal inputs and have limited pathways to support due to identity concealment in response to anticipated stigma. Therefore, it will be important in future research to explore the unique forms of stigma and discrimination experienced by aromantic people compared to other members of the LGBTQIA + community to inform awareness and support. For example, in respect to how to best integrate this unique stigma and discrimination into mental health interventions, particularly in addressing stigma directly in mental health interventions (Layland et al. 2020). This is in conjunction with concerted efforts to raise awareness around what aromanticism is to increase its acceptance and integration within LGBTQIA + communities and society broadly. Greater research into the experiences of stigma and how they may be internalized should also be conducted.

The life-changing impact of connecting with an aromantic identity

Participants spoke in detail about how connecting with their aromantic identity was life-changing. It provided avenues for the understanding and acceptance of who they are, and how they existed within a world that is often centered around romantic love. Furthermore, the relief of rejecting amatonormativity illuminated pathways to new hopes and dreams for the future. This aligns with how some single individuals describe not being in a relationship, which whilst is not the same as being aromantic, may similarly represent a shift from amatonormative expectations. Akin to our sample, Simpson (2016) described the pleasure single participants felt not being partnered and how participants viewed being single as a positive aspect of their identity (while traditionally assumed to be negative).

Many aromantic people reported having close and meaningful relationships – they however often did not fall within the bounds of what is perceived to be a traditional romantic relationship or friendship. The re-defining of what a romantic relationship (and relationships generally) was for some participants a key part of their identity, as found in similar research (Tessler, 2023b). Literature has argued for the validation of multiple forms of intimacy that can be experienced within LGBTQIA + relationships—particularly those of aromantic people (Hammack et al., 2018).

Our findings, consistent with work by Hammack et al., (2018), highlight that intimacy can look many ways for aromantic people and emphasize the need for future research to explore the ways this diversity can be expressed and pursued. For example, our participants described attractions beyond sexual and romantic, such as sensual, esthetic, and platonic. Investigating these further may provide greater insight into the relationships aromantic people participate in and expand our understanding of relationships broadly.

Our participants described how connecting with their identity facilitated connection to other people—particularly online aromantic communities. At times these interacted, with the community sometimes helping participants embrace who they are. Wider literature also advocates for the protective role that the community can play in buffering minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to promote the benefits of being aromantic for aromantic individuals and facilitate community connection to promote resilience. At a societal level, advocating for this may help re-write social discourse that commonly views not being in a traditional, monogamous romantic relationship as a deficit.

Implications for "romantic love"

Our participants described experiencing all the emotions linked to romantic love identified in scholarly work—passion, intimacy, and companionship (Graham, 2010; Masuda, 2003; Sternberg, 1997)—with people in their lives. Therefore, these factors should not be considered exclusive to amatonormative conceptualisations of romantic love. Scholarly work that seeks to define romantic love may benefit from considering the importance of context and intention in defining romantic relationships and what constitutes romantic love. For example, definitions of romantic love need to consider whether actions and feelings are *intended* to convey and cultivate romantic relationships—vs. other valid attachments such as platonic or sexual relationships.

Slowly, scholarly work is moving to explore and acknowledge wider forms of partnerships outside of monogamous, romance-oriented relationships (Lavender-Stott, 2023). Our participants described how their aromantic identity challenges amatonormative expectations surrounding partnerships. A recent study by Tessler (2023b) re-affirms this, where one aromantic participant shared that they do not categorize their relationships, rather each relationship is unique and operates accordingly. As well, challenging definitions of relationships was discussed by 84.6% of individuals. These experiences mirror other forms of diverse romantic experiences such as consensual non-monogamous relationships, relationship anarchy, and solo polyamory (Gómez, 2018; Scoats & Campbell, 2022). As for our sample, other research has found there are consequences to breaking amatornormativity. Participants who engage in consensual non-monogamous relationships in the study by Füllgrabe and Smith (2023) also experienced stigma due to their relationships. However, like our participants, embracing their non-amatonormative identity was life-changing. Therefore, we consider it pivotal to continue to explore new domains of partnership that defy amatonormative expectations to illuminate pathways for empowerment, acceptance, and understanding.

Strengths and limitations

This research has some important strengths to identify. First, it was grounded in the principles of CBPR (Israel et al. 2005, 2010), meaning that there was meaningful community engagement within each step of the research process. This strengthens the validity of the results through the convergence of both insider and outside perspectives to overcome social biases and power hierarchies between participants and researchers (Henrickson et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2013). A second strength is that a large sample from many countries around the world was recruited for this study. Whilst there is currently no known benchmark for the representativeness of identities within this community, our demographic findings generally aligned with the AUREA census (AUREA, 2021a), which had almost 10,000 participants, suggesting this may be the closest thing to a representative sample that we can currently ascertain. Our large sample size also allowed for a rich thematic analysis based on a large amount of community experiences. Finally, our sample contains responses from individuals who have identified with aromanticism for many years, yielding a rich range of historical lived experiences to questions posed.

A limitation of this research is that using an online survey meant there was no opportunity for probing, which may increase the likelihood of unique themes (Weller et al., 2018). A second limitation is that the study originally aimed to recruit any individual who did not identify as alloromantic—meaning some data may involve people who identify with neither alloromantic nor aromantic or identities beneath this umbrella. Much of the sample reported aromantic identities and non-aromantic identifying responses were omitted. Any remaining not-Aro-not-Allo responses retained still offer value to the research questions through their broader positioning as a "romantic minority." Overall, given the sheer diversity of what it means to be aromantic and broadly as a romantic minority, our results do not intend to speak to every single aromantic person's experiences. Our results are also limited as the respondents are mostly from Western English-speaking samples and recruiting primarily occurred through one peer organization. As well, only online voices were captured, meaning that some individuals not connected with online aromantic communities would not have had the opportunity to share their voices. Therefore, results should be interpreted carefully, and future research is needed to continue to explore the experiences of the plethora of identities beneath romantic attraction.

Conclusion

Overall, this research is one of the first to empirically explore aromanticism and the common misconceptions this group experiences, as well as the benefits of connecting with an aromantic identity. Our research found that to be under the aromantic umbrella was a highly personal spectrum of experiences distinct from other attractions. Connecting with an aromantic identity opened doors to new lives through the rejection of the pressure of amatonormativity, connection with the aromantic community, and understanding non-aromantic folks. However, to prevent potential detrimental impacts of discrimination, stigmatizing misconceptions regarding aromanticism need to be challenged. This research highlights an urgent need for more empirical exploration; however, the authors strongly support a call for all future research to use CBPR models. This allows for research to take a strengths-based approach, which amplifies the aromantic community's voice, potential, and self-efficacy to raise recognition and awareness of the aromantic community.

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Ethics approval

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Data availability statement

Due to the personal nature of the data collected, data will not be made available to those outside of the research team.

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Appendix 1: List of questions asked in the AroUQ study

Section 1: Define

1. In your words, what is aromanticism [open text]
2. Aromanticism is sometimes assumed to be under the asexual label. Do you agree or disagree with this assumption?
   a. I agree – please elaborate [open text]
   b. I disagree – please elaborate [open text]
3. At what age (in years) did you realize your aromantic identity? [open text]
4. How did you discover aromanticism? If you remember, feel free to name specific resources or websites [open text]
5. Do you currently have relationships you consider important in your life?
   a. Yes – can you please explain more what this relationship looks like? [open text]
   b. No – are you interested in pursuing relationships with one or more people? [open text]

Section 2: Discrimination

1. Have you experienced discrimination based on your aromantic identity?
   a. If yes, please describe your experience [open text]
   b. If no, please describe why you think you haven't experienced discrimination [open text]
2. Do you identify with any of the following community level labels? Select all that you feel apply and describe why you like those labels.
   a. LGBTQIA+ [open text]
   b. Queer [open text]
   c. Rainbow [open text]
   d. Another option not listed (please describe) [open text]
   e. I don't identify with any community labels [open text]
3. Do you have any thoughts about the term 'LGBTQIA+' that you'd like to share?
4. Have you experienced discrimination from other people within the LGBTQIA+/Queer/rainbow community based on your aromantic identity?
   a. Yes – please describe your experience [open text]
   b. No – please describe why you think you haven't experienced prejudice [open text]
5. What would you like for other people to **stop** doing/saying?
   a. Other aromantic people [open text]
   b. LGBTQIA+/rainbow/queer people who are not aromantic [open text]

   c. People who are not aromantic or LGBTQIA+/rainbow/queer [open text]
6. What would you like for other people to **start** doing/saying?
   a. Other aromantic people [open text]
   b. LGBTQIA+/rainbow/queer people who are not aromantic [open text]
   c. People who are not aromantic or LGBTQIA+/rainbow/queer [open text]
7. Have you experienced misconceptions directly from another individual, or heard via another aromantic person's shared experience?
   a. Directly from another person
   b. Heard from another person's experience
   c. Combination of both
8. In your opinion, what are some of the worst misconceptions around aromanticism? [open text]
9. Have you come out to someone as aromantic?
   a. If yes, please describe your experience [open text]
   b. If no, please share why you haven't if you are comfortable to do so [open text]

Section 3: Barriers

1. What barriers do you feel are unique to you as an aromantic person? [open text]
2. What is it like existing in a society where wanting romance (amatonormativity) is treated as a default setting?
3. Do you feel that amatonormtivity is a barrier to how you express yourself/exist in the world?
   a. If yes, please describe further [open text].
   b. If no, please share why if you are comfortable to do so [open text]
4. Have you ever disclosed your aromantic identity to a healthcare professional?
   a. If yes, please describe what that experience was like for you [open text]
   b. If no, please share why if you are comfortable to do so [open text]
5. Has your aromantic identity ever prevented you from accessing health care (for example, Doctors or Psychologists?)
   a. If yes, please describe why [open text]
   b. If no, is there anyhing you want to tell us about your experience of accessing healthcare? [open text]

Section 4: Shine

1. What do you feel are the positives about being aromantic? [open text]
2. What would you like the world to know about aromanticism? [open text]
3. Do you find that connecting with your aromantic identity has helped you to better understand/navigate your life?
   a. If yes, please explain how [open text]
   b. If no, please share why if you are comfortable to do so [open text]
4. What do you think aromanticism has to offer the world?

Section 5: Where next?

1. Is there anything else you would like to share with us that you feel wasn't covered in the questions so far? [open text]
2. Is there anything you would like researchers to focus on next? [open text]