

With(out) love from Japan: An analysis of the asexual spectrum in Shirono Honami's *I want to be the wall* and Isaki Uta's *Is Love the Answer?*

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Abstract Starting from the mid-2010s, Japan has seen a rise in media works (such as novels, comics, animation, and TV dramas) discussing the asexual and aromantic identities with an ever-increasing number of people connecting with those labels and, some of them actively associating with the LGBTQ+ community. The pull towards an asexual and aromantic society has also been linked to the lower marriage and birth rate by some experts, wondering whether the identification with such labels could be caused by societal shifts (busier work schedules, less spending power, financial insecurities). In this context, the two works this paper analyses, *I Want to Be the Wall* (*Watashi wa kabe ni naritai*, 2019-2023) by Shirono Honami and *Is Love the Answer?* (*Kimi no sekai ni koi wa nai*, 2020) by Isaki Uta link the societal pressure to conform to an allosexual and heterosexual way of life with the feeling of disconnect from romantic and platonic relationships with peers.

Keywords Ace spectrum; Japanese studies; manga and anime studies; queer studies

1. Introduction

Despite the active presence of asexual activists involved in the queer community since the 1970s, such as Lisa Orlando with her publication of *The Asexual Manifesto* in 1972, and a strong online presence since 2001, helped by *The Asexuality Visibility and Awareness Network* (AVEN), a collective of people who share their experiences from different paths of life, only in recent years both asexuality, and its broader definition of “ace spectrum”¹ have gained attention from mainstream media with a variety of fictional characters, books and stories.

Moreover, numerous academic studies have been conducted on the subject in the past fifteen years, including those by Przybylo (2011; 2019), Scherrer (2009), and Catri (2021), so that terms such as ‘asexual’ or ‘aromantic’² have become more familiar to those outside the queer community. Although experiencing an increasing number of people connecting with the label thanks to this new visibility, asexuality has also been contested not only in mainstream society, but also in queer spaces, as it has often been seen as sharing too similar experiences to the cisgender and heterosexual majority to be included in queer spaces (Decker 2014: 70-71).

It can be argued asexuality has moved closer to the limelight, but it is still seen as ‘invisible’ and ‘omitted’, as Decker explains in her book *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (2014: 68): “it’s not an experience of outward oppression so much as it’s an experience of omission—of being left out and unable to participate in something that’s supposedly central to life.” In Europe and North America, asexuality is gradually gaining recognition in the social context. This has led to larger gatherings, conferences, and meet-ups on the topic, adding to a larger participation in pride events, too; an entire week at the end of October is dedicated to raising awareness about asexuality.

However, this growing awareness of asexuality is not limited to these regions as it is also observed in countries like Japan, which have a different historical and social background. Indeed, because of specific changes found in Japanese society, asexuality has been the focus of academic studies such as Kobayashi’s 2017 report “Have Japanese People Become Asexual? Love in

¹ “Ace” is an abbreviation of the word “asexual”. “Ace spectrum” defines sexualities that are closely related to asexuality.

² Coined on 26th April 2002 by user Maxnova100 on the Yahoo group «Haven for the Human Amoeba». <https://hha.acearchive.lgbt/47/#message-1157> (Last access on 27th February 2024)

Japan”, focusing on the growing reports of young people (especially men in their twenties and thirties) identifying as asexual, or the 2020 paper by Miyake and Hiramori featuring a survey, finding 65,5% of all the 1650 participants identifying with the label asexual and 48% as aromantic.

This paper focuses on the interesting evolution of asexuality in Japanese society, analysed through two different media representations of the phenomenon. The first part of this contribution will delve in the international definitions of asexuality and its related concepts such as sexual and romantic spectrums. This will help to understand the process of transformation and appropriation done by Japanese society.

The second part discusses the aim of this paper: analyse the influence of such shift in thinking about asexuality on the emergence of groups dedicated to the asexual experience in Japan and the way that mainstream media addresses the nuances of Japanese society through pop media.

Lastly, the last section of this paper will pose and try to answer two questions: why has Japan been so receptive to asexuality? How can this be linked to current societal changes? Part of this last paragraph will also be dedicated to analysing and highlighting the differences between the Japanese perspective on asexuality and the hegemonic Euro-North American point of view. The case studies used in the paper focus on the representation of asexuality in two comics, *I Want to Be the Wall* (*Watashi wa kabe ni naritai*, 2019-2023) by Shirono Honami and *Is Love the Answer?* (*Kimi no Sekai ni koi wa nai*, 2020) by Isaki Uta.

2. What is asexuality?

Defined by AVEN on their website, asexuality (sometimes also known as nonsexuality) refers to a sexual orientation that is denoted by the absence of sexual attraction. Likewise, psychologist and professor Anthony Bogaert describes an asexual person as someone that has “never felt sexual attraction to anyone at all” (Bogaert 2006: 242). Both definitions were put under scrutiny in Przybylo’s *Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety* (2011: 445), as “both reactive and absolute, predicated on lack, absence and ‘neverness’”, removing the discrepancies among different types of asexual experiences and how they relate to society.

The idea of asexuality has been extensively studied and discussed in literature and academia. A community project called the Ace Archive Project aims to collect and save older references to asexuality and aromanticism. This

grassroots initiative is not new to the asexual community, which is also known as ‘ace’ and is often symbolized by the ace of spades.³

The discussions on this orientation have introduced new concepts to the mainstream, such as the romantic and sexual spectrum. By considering romantic feelings and sexuality as fluid and changeable over time in terms of degree and intensity, the discourse has challenged the societal norms of monogamy, heterosexuality, and heteroromanticism as the only accepted norms (Castro 2023). As a result, these have come under scrutiny to a significant extent.

Starting from the mid-2010s, asexuality and its other declinations (demisexuality, graysexuality, etc.) have garnered more visibility online, especially on social platforms such as Tumblr and Reddit (Kenney 2020; Schudson & Van Anders 2019). The growing awareness managed to distance asexuality and asexual people from pathologisation, having it removed from the DMS-5 in 2013 and in 2022 the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counsellors and Therapists “published a position statement on how to care for asexual patients” (Parshall 2024), highlighting how asexuality is neither a trauma response, nor a disorder.

Of course, asexuality is not limited to European or North American societies and has been present in various cultures. However, the use of social media and intercultural exchanges has played a significant role in shaping the language used to discuss this orientation and the experiences related to it. The next section will focus specifically on the Japanese context.

3. Japan and the asexual boom

When discussing sexuality and romance from a queer perspective, it’s important to remember that cisgender and heterosexual societal norms still tend to view patterns in binaries instead of spectrums or variations between a range of poles. In societies like Japan, where categorization and dichotomies are highly valued, discussing asexuality or any other queer experience can lead to a binary and gender-biased explanation of certain phenomena. It’s significant to note that this is not done with the intention of hiding or erasing the fluidity or shifts in Japanese society, but it’s a point to keep in mind when approaching the topic.

³ Although ace of spades is now specifically associated with people identifying as both aromantic and asexual.

3.1 “Why don’t you just marry and have children?”

Following the economic crisis that invested Japan in the 1990s, caused by the rapid inflation in 1986 of real estates and stock market prices and an equally rapid downfall in 1991, the country saw a sudden decrease in birth-rates, which continues to this day, as reported by the United Nations in its World Population Prospects of 2022.

This decline was further exacerbated by the inability of workers to start new family units or the lack of time and financial resources to care for and raise children. Low birth-rates are also a secondary effect of a declining drive to marry, in contrast to the idea of a pre-war traditional family unit created after a heterosexual wedding and childbearing, still present in Japanese society. Moreover, compared to some European and North American countries, Japan has seen one of the lowest rates of children born outside of marriage (see Figure 1), reaching a 2,4% in 2020 (OECD), sharing the record only with South Korea and Turkey.

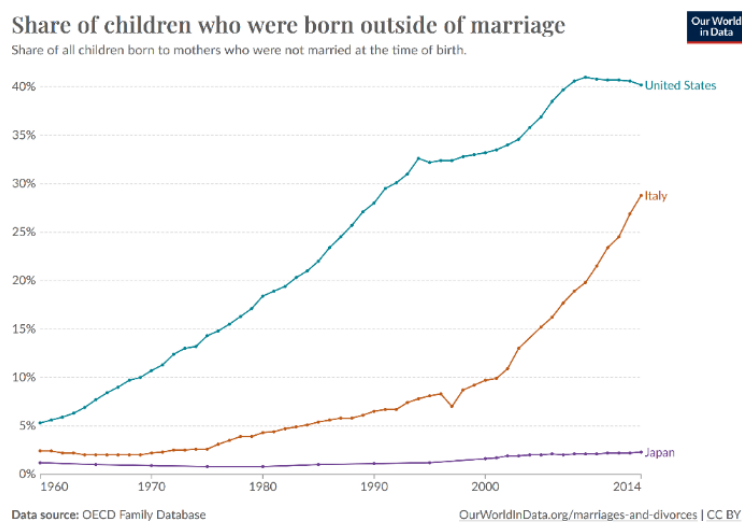


Figure 1. Share of children who were born outside of marriage
Source: OECD Family Database via Our World in Data

One of the factors bringing younger generations to distance themselves from romantic or sexual relationships (leading then to marriage and childrearing) could be overworking, which disincentives social interactions while sharpening alienation and isolation from family, friends, and partners. In Japanese society, due to strict gender roles and a traditional marriage structure, women are now forced to prioritize either their careers or family and childcare. Further confirmation of this trend can be found in several

reports, such as the 2022 article by Justin McCurry for *The Guardian*, citing “asked what constituted an “ideal” lifestyle for women, almost 40% of surveyed single men and 34% of single women cited the ability to balance a career with raising children”. Furthermore, there is an economic imbalance between the cost of raising children without an universal health service and with few welfare policies regarding nurseries or dedicated to helping new mothers, and the stagnant wages (*The Economist*, 2023) that haven’t helped close the gap between men and women’s economic mobility.

Additionally, women are subject to stricter rules when it comes to accessing contraception or abortions, which are performed only in cases of health concerns, economic hardship, or rape. However, even in such cases, women may need to obtain permission from their husband (in the case of a married woman) or the man who has supposedly fathered the child (in the case of single women) before receiving these services. This can create a disincentive for women to make a free and informed choice about whether to complete a pregnancy, particularly in situations where they may face social or economic pressure to do so, and act as a deterrent to women from actively pursuing romantic or sexual relationships.

Meanwhile, men are often tied down by work, struggling to maintain stable romantic and sexual relationships due to the demands of productiveness requested by the job market and the expectations related to men as being the sole source of income in the traditional family household (also known as *daikokubashira*, the main pillar of the traditional rural house) (Dalton & Dales 2016: 8-10). Compared to older generations, who felt a decisive division between their families and work and “they are emotionally cut off from their wives and children, in that their lives have for so long been lived in the workplace” (Mathews 2003: 111), younger generations of men are seemingly uninterested in pursuing love or sex and, in a broader sense, creating family units. At the beginning of the new century, the new hesitation found in men and the drive of women for independency and freedom in the workplace puzzled the mainstream media outlets, as they tried to find an explanation for the sudden changes in Japanese society, often seen as immutable and stable.

This phenomenon involving younger men was later condensed into the label of ‘herbivore man’ (*sōshoku-kei danshi*), a term coined by writer Fukasawa Maki in 2006 after publishing an article on *U35 Danshi māketingu zukan* (*U35 Men Marketing: An Illustrated Guide*), an online magazine of

Nikkei Business newspaper.⁴ Men who were considered ‘herbivores’ were viewed as passive, gentle and more attractive to women due to being less aggressive than older generations. However, according to Morioka (2013: 6-7), as of 2009, ‘herbivore men’ have also been associated with taking care of their appearance by focusing on fashion, skincare and accessories, which has led to a pushback from older male commentators who view this as a ‘feminized’ version of traditional masculine traits. These traditional masculine traits include pursuing women sexually, suppressing emotions, and prioritizing work above all else.

The changes described in this section have been previously used to define a certain external push towards asexuality (Kobayashi 2017: 14), an interpretation that often clashes with the European and North American essentialist view of ‘identity’, understood as something innate and unchanging (Morgenroth et al. 2021: 13-14). This will be explored further in the next section.

The declining trend of romantic and sexual relationships in Japan is a complex topic that involves various factors, as Gershon (2022: 158) explains:

The growing interest of Anglo-American media in Japan’s hyposexuality, the deficiency or absence of sexual interest and activity among its people, is of much significance since it provokes questions around compulsory sexuality, hegemonic masculinity and queerness, by creating space for discussing the changing value and purpose of sex, and by challenging the view that a voracious sex drive is an inherent part of male identity.

In Japan, the adoption and popularisation of the word ‘asexual’ can be seen as a new approach to identification that doesn’t aligning with the ‘born this way’ paradigm of queerness. The label ‘asexual’ is often not perceived as an identity (to be read as a politically active identity) which needs to be explored in a community or as intrinsic trait of a person. Although analysing the point of view of bisexual people, Morgenroth et al. (2021) found:

[...] that higher levels of some facets of ingroup essentialism (i.e., naturalness and entitativity) can contribute to identification and belonging and that lower levels can make individuals feel a lack of belonging, partially because these views are believed to differ from those held by the LGBTQ+ community more generally. (2021: 3455)

⁴ The term was the subject of a special feature of the fashion magazine “non-no” (all lowercase) in 2008.

It can be argued that the concept of essentialism related to queer identities is an imported one from the Euro-North American perspective. This view dates to the medical and psychiatric understanding of homosexuality and transgender experiences. However, personal behaviours can still impact self-perception, sexuality, and gender expression, which can be connected to societal changes.

3.2 Asexuality and Fictosexuality in Japan

Although there is a presence in Japanese media of characters and people that could be described as ‘asexual’, the phenomenon of labelling ace-adjacent people is relatively recent.

In Japan, the label ‘asexual’ can often refer to people who would, in another context, identify as ‘aromantic’: this can be seen in the interpretation of the term in translations when TV series, movies or comics are adapted into other languages. For example, the protagonist of Shirono Honami’s *I Want to Be the Wall* is referred in the original text as ‘asexual’ (*asekushuaru*), while in both English and Italian translations the term was expanded to ‘asexual and aromantic’. Other instances can be found in academic studies, books focusing on LGBTQ+ topics or research online, where the term asexual is the primary term to discuss the ace spectrum.

Asexuality can also be linked to a different concept of ‘attraction’, which removes the human component from the picture. Delving deeper into subcultures, as Patrick Galbraith (2015; 2019; 2020) points out in his studies, Japan fosters a parallel view of romantic and sexual relationships that does not involve other human beings but rather objects and/or fictional characters. These facets of relational interactions should not be seen as pathological or devious, as they were often referred to in sensationalistic European or North American media, but as interesting facet of human development, with its negatives and positives. One label that can be discussed in this light is ‘fictosexuality’, first discussed in 2017 by Yule et al., signalling how specifically asexual women were keener in indulging fantasies with non-human (fictional) characters.

The term is described as “a strong and lasting feeling of love or desire toward a fictional character” by Karhulahti and Välisalo (2021:10), frequently found in *otaku*⁵ and *fujoshi*⁶ culture. Another example is from Matsūra (2023:

⁵ *Otaku* (オタク), lit. honorific form of ‘your house’, can be explained as a zealous fan. It is mostly associated to pop culture entertainment, such as movies, TV shows, videogames or

1) in *Fictosekushuaru kara kangaeru jendā/sekushuariti no seiji* (*On the Politics of Gender/Sexuality of Fictosexuality*), describing the word ‘fictosexual’ or ‘fictoromantic’ as,

[...] a term coined to describe a sexuality that involves being attracted to fictional characters. Specifically, the term is used in Japan to describe (1) the desire to engage in activities generally regarded as ‘erotic’ or ‘romantic’ with fictional characters, or (2) the experience of desire for fictional sexual expressions that are different from desire related to real people. The term fictoromantic is used to describe romantic attraction to fictional *characters*.

Matsūra explains that fictional characters can be seen as a separate type of gender compared to their “flesh-and-blood human” (*namami no ningen*) counterparts, creating an interesting overlapping with the concept of queerness outside of a normative and heterosexist framework.

The specific interest towards fictional relationships is not an exclusive of Japan, but the union of specific characteristics found in Japanese society such as consumerism, overwork, alienation, and isolation have pushed people to find alternative ways to cater to their emotional needs. Especially in the context of fan spaces (fandom), fictosexuality is still being explored, as it can be seen as a paraphilia (Yamaguchi 2020: 14) or a choice (Mohammad 2023: 79) dictated by specific and personal conditions. This, of course, comes in direct contrast to the previously discussed orientation essentialism/‘born this way’ discussions.

4. Talking manga: case study

4.1 *I Want to Be the Wall*

I Want to Be the Wall (*Watashi wa kabe ni naritai*, also known as *I want to be a wall*) is a slice-of-life manga written by Shirono Honami. It was published online from 2019 to 2023 in the magazine B’s-LOG COMIC and then collected into three volumes, also translated in English and Italian. Shirono is

comics. It can also be applied to objects or hobbies (es. *Densha otaku*, a ‘super-fan of trains’). The name comes from the idea that ‘super-fans’ would use their houses as a gathering spot for likeminded people.

⁶ *Fujoshi* (腐女子), lit. ‘rotten woman’, is usually a female counterpart of *otaku*, but encompassing a specific interest for artworks, novels, comics, etc. depicting sexual or romantic relationships between male characters.

an active supporter of disability, trans*, and queer campaigns, and has publicly shown her support by displaying the rainbow and transgender flags next to their name on Twitter/X.⁷ While it could be speculated that this may indicate either allyship or Shirono being queer themselves, there is no confirmation of either of these theories.

The three volumes of *I Want to Be the Wall* introduce the relationship between Yuriko, an asexual and aromantic woman who enjoys reading Boys' Love⁸ manga, and Gokurōta, a gay man who is in love with his childhood best friend. Both Yuriko and Gokurōta meet at an *omiai*, the traditional pre-marriage interview, hosted by the family of the two. Both seem to feel a certain kinship for one another, being extremely uncomfortable at the idea of marrying. The two grow more at ease with each other, creating a tentative friendship which leads into the decision to get married.

Despite a decrease in recent times, the push towards marriage and procreation is still strong in Japanese society, forcing many people to still partake into arranged marriages. As explained by anthropologist Tokuhiko Yōko (2010), Japanese society is based on marriage (*kaikon shakai*), which creates pressure for queer individuals to marry for convenience (Lunsing 2015). Tokuhiko underlines how marriage is normalised to the point that “it is *atarimae no koto* (a matter of course) to get married and rear children” (Tokuhiko 2010: 23). Society puts an arbitrary age limit for both men (around 30) and women (around 26) to find a partner and create a traditional, heterosexual family. Such peer pressure is found in both Yuriko's mother, ecstatic to know her daughter will finally get married and adding that it is a ‘miracle’ someone like her managed to meet a man and tie the knot, and Gokurōta's grandmother, who misjudges Yuriko and Gokurōta's friendship, hoping to see her grandson finally married.

There is a vast literature of manga and novels – such as *Love My Life* (*Rabu mai raifu*) by Yamaji Ebine (2001) or *Twinkle Twinkle* (*Kira kira hikaru*) by Ekuni Kaori (1991) – focused on marriages among queer people to appease family pressure and conform to the normative standards of relationships. Some focus on the wish to be or get married even when the person, may they just wish to be single or because they identify as asexual or aromantic, has no interest in a romantic relationship or to be tied with a

⁷ Twitter/X profile, <https://twitter.com/ShironoHonami> (Last access on 8th March 2024)

⁸ *Boys' Love* is a subgenre of comics for a female audience focusing on romantic and/or sexual relationships between two (or more) male characters.

partner, as in the case of Nagata Kabi in her autobiographical work *My Wandering Warrior Existence: Nagata Kabi* (*Meisō senshi Nagata Kabi*, 2020) or in Kodama Naoko's *I Married a Girl to Shut my Parents Up* (*Oya ga urusai no de senpai (♀) to gisō kekkon shitemita*, 2018).

The importance of marriage, marrying and being married in Japan is pivotal to understand the urge towards a monogamous union influences queer people's choices, such as in Yuriko and Gokurōta's case. Moreover, many of these unions are validated, and thus productive, only with the birth of a child, something that is directly requested from Gokurōta's grandmother (Figure 2). The pressure of having children often overshadows personal wants and needs, creating a constant sense of betrayal and uneasiness, which is further aggravated in cases like the one seen in *I Want to be the Wall*.



Figure 2. Gokurōta's grandmother says, 'I'll have to keep living until I see your child, my grandchild's face.'

Shirano explores the concept of 'family' and the expectations that come with it. The story presents an alternative interpretation - the two main characters pretend to be married, using scripts similar to those in a play, to maintain appearances with their families, friends, and acquaintances.

Despite this façade, they bond over shared interests, food, and life experiences and form a type of 'found family' that challenges the traditional view of family as being heterosexual, monogamous, and focused on procreation. The story challenges the preconception of a what a 'partner' is and what a family unit should represent: both Yuriko and Gokurōta have to come to terms with their supposed roles as woman and man, as wife and husband. Although an innovative and fulfilling way to view a relationship - which can connect with the idea of a queer platonic partner (QPP) - for both

Yuriko and Gokurōta, this walking outside predefined borders brings worry and, in some cases shame (Figure 3).

The perception the characters have of still being uneasy in such a ‘different’ type of relationship, although still placed in the category of marriage, might be seen as still a lingering feeling of ‘unfulfillment’ of their predestined roles in society. Shame is a facet of queer experience that has been documented in a variety of both academic papers (Phelan 1997; Munt 2007) and fictional media; such feelings stem from the incongruence felt by the queer subject when referring themselves to normative society and perceiving a discrepancy between their life and what is seen as a ‘normative’ path. In this context, because of their queerness, both Gokurōta and Yuriko feel the impossibility of recreating the traditional family unit in the image of the older generations.



Figure 3. Gokurōta apologises to the picture of his late parents for not having ‘created a “normal” family and a “normal” marriage like everyone else’s.’

Yuriko experiences a strong feeling of distance and shame, isolated by the way people perceive her actions as being immature, lacking in awareness and independence. Infantilization is a common issue that asexual and aromantic individuals face while interacting with a predominantly allosexual society (Anelli 2023; Decker 2014), and this is further aggravated by social biases towards women’s choices, thus Yuriko’s identity as an asexual and aromantic woman makes it difficult for her to feel like a fully-fledged adult in society.

Yuriko’s parents fall in the normative mindset which perpetuates heteropatriarchal structures, hoping for their daughter to have a child and opposing her complaints as just her being ‘stubborn’. They justify their behavior by claiming to prioritize her happiness (Figure 4). This kind of concern is frequently depicted in media such as comics and movies that feature queer characters who deviate from

societal norms. In such depictions, parents often use this argument to dissuade their children from actions that could hinder their success in society.



Figure 4. “Your happiness is our priority.”

Throughout the three volumes, Shirono depicts a very contemporary story that tackles different facets of queer life and its interloping with normative society. Specifically, it wishes to underline the problems that women identifying with asexuality face in society: peer pressure into marrying; infantilisation; vilification of their orientation and choices; the wish to pursue a life that involve a different depiction of ‘family’ and that doesn’t involve childbearing and traditional ‘wifely’ duties.

4.2 *Is Love the Answer?*

Isaki Uta debuted as a mangaka after winning the Spring edition of the Afternoon Four Season Prize in the Kodansha’s Monthly Afternoon magazine in 2008, with her work *Kaette oide* (*Come back home!*). Published between 2020 and 2021 on the bimonthly magazine Hatsu Kiss, *Is Love the Answer?* (also known as *Kimi no sekai ni koi wa nai*), isn’t the first time Isaki has explored asexuality in her writing, but it is her most comprehensive work. Isaki is interested in creating educational works that explore asexuality and aromanticism by placing characters in unfamiliar situations and using their thought processes to explain terminology to readers. While there are a higher percentage of women and transgender people who identify as asexual and/or aromantic, the protagonist of Isaki’s previous manga was a young cisgender man.

Mine-kun is non-sexual (*Mine-kun wa nonsekushuaru*) was a self-produced fanzine sold at the COMITIA 130 convention held in Tokyo in 2019. The term ‘non-sexual’ itself found in the title notes a first approach to the concept of asexuality, without appropriating any international words but just using a portmanteau, by substituting the Greek ‘a-’, denoting a lack of something, with the Latin ‘non-’, which negates what follows. This happens with original Japanese terminology, such as *museiaisha* (無性愛者), where the first character *mu* can be seen as the asexual ‘a-’ and *hiseiaisha* (非性愛者), where *hi* would play an equivalent role to ‘non-’. At the moment, *hiseiaisha* is used as a Japanese ‘translation’ of the term non-sexual, which indicates a romantic asexual person.⁹

The term found widespread use around 2016 but was quickly substituted by the more popular ‘asexual’, while ‘aromantic’ prevailed above both starting from 2021 (Figure 5). In the comic, the main character, Mine, expressly states how he is interested in romance but has ‘no sexual urges, [he] is non-sexual’ (Figure 6).

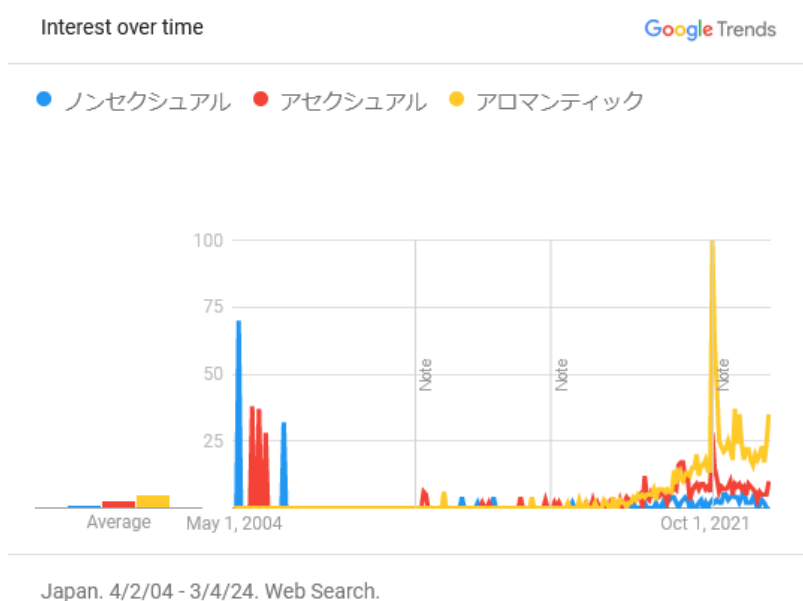


Figure 5. Google Trends for the term non-sexual (in blue), asexual (in red) and aromantic (in yellow) from 2004 to 2024.

⁹ On <https://www.asexual.jp/info/> (Last access on 25th March 2024).



Figure 6. Mine-kun is non-sexual (Mine kun wa nonsekushuaru), p. 9

The 2019 fanzine revolves around the relationship between Murai, a university student who confesses her love to Mine on the first pages, and Mine, the titular character. Mine agrees to become Murai's first boyfriend, even though he makes explicit his disinterest in sex, but even in kissing or cuddling. The short story, showing us Murai's point of view, ends in the couple breaking up after Mine suggests he might not be the one Murai is looking for, as he might not be able to 'give [Murai] what she wishes'.¹⁰ Murai, who has been showing sexual and romantic interest in Mine since the very beginning, meets another man later in life and marries him – implying the relationship between the two as allosexual and heteronormative. It is to note that Murai 'cherishes' the relationship she had with Mine, in a tone that could be considered condescending, although presented in earnest inside the story.

In this scenario, Isaki approaches asexuality as a lonesome path, where Mine rejects the relationship with Murai, although he, indeed, liked her company. This decision is a suffered one, shown in the dramatic paneling and emptiness of the scene, focusing on Mine's upset face as he tears up. Decker (2014: 64) expresses the feeling of frustration and disappointment found in asexual people as a feeling of guilt "if they don't satisfy their partners in a way that seems so fundamental and important to them. This happens even without inordinate pressure from the partners or society." This perfectly matches with

¹⁰ 「多分村井の欲しいものをあげられない」, "tabun Murai no hoshii mono wo agerarenai". Page 33.

the reading of Mine's story, but it can also be linked to how the main character of *Is Love the Answer?* feels about herself.

In her second work, Isaki explores more in depth the theme of asexuality in the context of Japanese society. The comic introduces Chika, a girl who has always felt disconnected from her peers and society at large since her high school days. She feels confused by the concept of romantic and sexual relationships – especially when the pursuer is a boy, as they are often depicted by Isaki as pushy and brash. Chika's isolation is further underlined by space imagery, where she, indeed, acts and perceives herself as an 'alien' (Figures 7 and 8). This is further exemplified by the design of the dormitory where she lives, which resembles a stereotypical alien spacecraft.



Figure 5. Cover for chapter 1



Figure 6. Chika asks Prof. Ishii to 'teach her about humans'.

As she starts attending University, Chika meets her idol and reason for taking majoring in psychology, Professor Ishii Shinobu, who identifies both as asexual and agender (*musei*¹¹). Prof. Ishii is a pivotal character in the story, as they take Chika under their wing, allowing the girl a safe space to express herself and learn more about the world. Isaki's writing reiterates how 'normalcy' (*futsū*) and 'common sense' (*jōshiki*) become the main causes of discomfort for queer people, and how it reflects specifically on asexual and aromantic identities for their presumed 'lack' of romantic and sexual interest,

¹¹ *Musei* (無性) is the Japanese translation of the word 'agender', using the character *mu* 無, which supposes an opposition or negation related to the character that follows, and *sei* 性, which stands for sex or gender.

deemed intrinsic parts of the human condition by what Przybylo (2019) calls ‘compulsory sexuality’. The paradigm of ‘normalcy’ in a society is tied to the presumption of pursuing romance in a monogamous, heteroromantic and procreative (hence, sexual) standard, as Przybylo writes “[...] sexuality is presumed to be natural and normal to the detriment of various forms of asexual and nonsexual lives, relationships, and identities” (2019: 1).

In the text, normative society is depicted as a fixed and unchanging entity that individuals must conform to. This behavior is commonly seen in Japanese culture, where the concept of *shikata ga nai* (something that cannot be helped) is prevalent, thus pushing back against ‘traditional’ or ‘normal’ behaviours is discouraged and seen as difficult or problematic. The more collectivist mindset present in Japanese society emphasizes homogenization and standardization to adapt to said norm (Teranishi 2020: 45-50), which can further isolate those who don't fit within it. Isaki's work depicts how this assimilation can overshadow personal needs and behaviors leading to faked agreeability.

As Chika makes new friends, she is assumed to have a traumatic past that has hindered her pursuit of romance. Isaki is aware of the stigma that ace people face, as they are often considered ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘broken’ due to their non-normative relationship patterns.¹² However, Chika manages to befriend Umezaki, a straightforward and rude young man, who pushes her to learn about sexual minorities (called *sekumai* in the text, from *sekushuaru mainoriti*) to better understand herself. (Figures 9 and 10)



Figures 7 and 10. Ume explains that sexuality can change over time, and it doesn't have to be fixed (9). He then calls for Chika to go ‘read some books [on the topic] (10)’.

Umezaki doesn't identify with any specific label, but Isaki makes him aware his behaviour is seen as ‘anomalous’ if compared to the active role applied to

¹² AVEN website, FAQ n. 5. <https://www.asexuality.org/?q=general.html#df5>. (Last access on 6th March 2024)

men and masculinity. As Cook eloquently explains “men who are not heterosexual or not interested in sex or marriage are thus often considered problematic” (Cook 2020: 54). This could be seen as a critique to the ‘herbivore man’ phenomena discussed above, where the label has become eponymous for a negative stereotype that doesn’t allow men freedom to explore their sexuality, may it be as a pursuer, as a pursued, both or neither.

However, Umezaki offers for an interesting interpretation of a sex-repulsed person. Shifting from a person who has not and does not want to attempt any sexual relationship, Umezaki had a few interactions with female partners but was left actively disgusted and/or uncomfortable with the process. This creates an overlapping with the common trope of an often cisgender man courting a woman to gain sexual gratification, then leaving her, and a man who is discovering his sexuality (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Umezaki is slapped as he confesses, he liked one of his partners better ‘as friends’. The woman replies, ‘Shouldn’t have you known about that before doing it (having sex)?’

The comic turns into a self-discovering narrative, where Chika learns about the LGBTQ+ community and, specifically, encounters asexuality and its definition. Isaki provides resources at the bottom of the page to create a parallelism between the reader and Chika, citing Decker’s *The invisible orientation: an introduction to asexuality* (2014) and Ishida’s *Hajimete manabu LGBT kiso kara torendo made* (2019) as sources for the protagonist’s reading, while also using specific language found in the international asexual communities. One example is the term ‘zucchini’ (ズッキーニ), used to refer to a queerplatonic partner (QPP), which Chen describes as a reset “from the unspoken expectations of either friend or romantic partner and forces the

relationship into a new place, with the ability to build new obligations and new expectations together.” (Chen 2020: 128)

Through learning more about herself, Chika finds others who don't fit into the 'norm' much like herself, such as Enomoto, a girl who isn't interested in finding a romantic partner but is entertained by the idea of reading BL manga – much like the protagonist of *I want to be the wall*, and Itō, a closeted gay man who has an online relationship with another man and was outed by an ex-friend, prompting him to move to Tokyo. Enomoto often feels ridiculed and considered childish for her love of comics, video games and cartoons. Society sees these interests as a 'surrogate of love' (*ren'ai no daiyōhin*) and considers marriage and raising children as the only path for women to a traditional adulthood.

Isaki promotes community building in her comic, as seen in other works such as Kamatani Yūki's *Our Dreams at Dusk* (*Shimanami tasogare*, 2015-2018), celebrating friendship and collaboration among peers, especially in the case of queer people. Although not sharing the same personal experience, Chika finally connects with others without feeling alienated, helped by joining an LGBTQ+ centre in another university.

5. Conclusions

The discourse revolving around asexuality in Japan is gaining more traction, both in the academic field and in pop culture representations. The country finds itself in the unique position of fostering a fertile ground for what can be considered a 'societal' asexuality stemming from cultural, economic and political changes. Japan's traditional view of family and relationships give less space for people to explore and self-actualise, besides not having enough welfare policies in place to help new couples (mainly heterosexual) to support themselves. This is pushing younger people to choose between work and family. As seen in this paper, such 'societal' asexuality can also come in conflict with the mainstream concept of sexuality as an "inborn" peculiarity of humans, a theory popular in European and North American queer discourses on the subject.

Building upon this, it's essential to acknowledge that identifying as asexual (or *museiaisha*) in Japan cannot be merely defined as a 'choice' dictated by external factors, disregarding the growing awareness in the country towards academic studies and literature about queerness and the

queer experience, besides the clear interest by Japanese authors in creating and narrating stories involving asexuality and asexual people.

The case studies of *Is Love the Answer?* and *I Want to be the Wall* demonstrate that finding acceptance and community, whether in a larger group or a non-traditional view of family, can be a source of comfort, allowing more people to thrive. Rejecting patriarchal societal norms that view monogamy, reproduction, heterosexuality, and allosexuality as standards can be seen as a ‘quiet’ rebellion and considered a bold and terrifying step towards self-assertion in both works, especially in the Japanese context which is often described as stricter if compared to other countries, such as the United States or the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, the growing number of Japanese works discussing asexuality and the ace spectrum, using both native and imported talking points. This highlights the need for broader examination of the topic in both a sociological and anthropological aspect, seeing how relevant it has become to contemporary Japanese society and how quickly the depiction of asexual people and the asexual experience have grown in the past six years.

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