

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Reactions to Violence Against Asexual Men

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SPRING 2024

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Psychology and History
with honors in Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Violence toward sexual minorities is an ongoing problem in our society. Compared to attention paid to other sexual minorities, few studies focusing on asexual individuals and discrimination against them exist. Research has shown that asexual people are dehumanized in relation to straight counterparts and in relation to their gay and bisexual counterparts (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012). This study evaluated whether heightened dehumanization against asexual individuals resulted in people evaluating reports of violence perpetrated against asexual individuals as less harmful, less credible, and less worthy of punishment than reports of violence perpetrated against straight and gay individuals. Participants were randomly assigned to read about either an asexual man, a gay man, or a straight man who was the target of verbal harassment, property violence, or physical violence. Participants then responded to inventories assessing perceived harm, credibility of the report, victim blaming, likelihood that a crime occurred, and support for perpetrator punishment. Results did not support the hypothesis that asexual men would be perceived as less harmed than straight and gay counterparts. Rather, asexual men's experiences were perceived similarly to gay men's experiences, and straight men were perceived as less harmed by violence than either gay or asexual men were. A significant relationship emerged between participant gender and all main effects, as women reported more perceived harm, found victims to be more credible, and offered greater support for perpetrator punishment. Implications on categorization of asexuality and perceived harm with relation to masculinity are discussed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, first and foremost, to Dr. Theresa Vescio, who has mentored me in my evolution as a researcher and academic both before and during this project. Dr. Vescio's guidance has been absolutely essential to this work, from the earliest theoretical formulations to the minute analyses. Throughout my time working with her, she has demonstrated not just how to be an effective academic, but why doing so is important. I'd next like to thank Dr. Sean Laurent, whose patience and genuine interest has been critical in bringing this thesis to a smooth conclusion. Thank you to Dr. Kenneth Levy for always responding quickly to my various questions and concerns over the course of this multi-year process. Thank you to the Schreyer Honors College for helping to fund and enrich my education at Penn State in a myriad of ways, epitomized by this unique opportunity to generate novel research through a formal review process as an undergraduate. Finally, I'd like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my family and the many friends I've drawn strength from throughout my time at Penn State. I would never have been able to aspire to, and much less achieve, the heights I have reached in the past four years without the support and encouragement you've all offered me through my various pursuits.

Introduction

Research into asexuality as a sexual orientation has grown more common over the past decade but remains sparse compared to literature on other marginalized groups. As with many marginalized groups, asexual people are at risk for discrimination and violence; however, both the scope of that risk and how the aftermath of violence plays out for asexual people is relatively unexplored. Evaluating how allosexual people—people who experience sexual attraction—respond to violence against asexual people is important to understanding the norms and environments in which asexual people live. Additionally, better understanding negative attitudes toward asexual people is a critical step in attempts to mitigate prejudice and discrimination toward asexual people.

The goal of the present research is to examine how people respond to instances of violence toward asexual people. In particular, the goal of the research is to test the hypotheses that asexual men may be perceived as less harmed by violence than either straight men and gay men, and that reduced perceptions of harm are associated with more victim blaming and the minimalization of acts of violence. To consider these possibilities, I will first discuss how asexuality has been conceptualized in the literature. I will then discuss culturally idealized notions of masculinity—or hegemonic masculinity—and note how men who identify as asexual fall short of culturally valued ideals, which may provide the basis of prejudice, discrimination, and violence toward asexual men. I will then review the existing empirical research that documents bias and discrimination against asexual people, as well as research that links asexuality to dehumanization of asexual people. I conclude by noting the potential consequences

of that dehumanization and, based on an integration of the aforementioned points, present novel hypotheses of focus to the present work.

Asexuality as an Identity

Many questions and complexities exist in attempts to conceptualize asexuality. Broadly speaking, asexuality refers to a lack or complete absence of sexual attraction toward others, and/or a lack of interest in sexual behavior (Brotto et al., 2015). Romantic orientation, which refers to a desire to bond romantically with members of a specific gender (Antonsen et al., 2020), can be (and often is) separate from sexual orientation for asexual people. In addition to lacking sexual desire, an asexual person may be aromantic—experiencing no desire for romantic bonding with other people—or they may be romantically oriented toward another group. For example, if an asexual person is heteroromantic, they may feel a desire to bond romantically with members of the opposite sex but have no desire for a sexual relationship as part of that bond (Antonsen et al., 2020). Some asexual people engage in sexual behaviors, while others do not. Furthermore, some sub-identities capture the existence of people who identify under the asexual umbrella but still experience sexual attraction under certain circumstances (Ace Community Survey Team, 2023). For instance, demisexual people experience sexual attraction only after an intimate bond has been established, and graysexual or gray-asexual people experience some level of sexual attraction that resides someplace on a continuum falling in the “gray area” between asexuality and allosexuality (Copulsky & Hammack, 2023). Some people have suggested that asexuality should be pathologized as a disorder, while others have noted that there is a lack of distress associated with low sexual desire in asexual-identifying individuals indicates, such that conceptualizing asexuality as a disorder makes little sense (Brotto et al., 2015).

Asexuality is a relatively uncommon orientation—an early estimate, which is still generally accepted in the field today, placed it at a little over 1% of the general population (Bogaert, 2004)—which inherently limits research on asexuality due to small sample sizes. For example, one study utilized a U.S. sample and compared asexual people to allosexual people with sexual minority identities but found only 19 asexual-identifying people compared to 1504 other sexual minorities who were allosexual; in other words, asexual people made up less than 2% of the sample (Rothblum et al., 2020). One exception to the rule of asexual people making up small sample sizes in research is the Ace Community Survey (ACS), an online volunteer effort which uses sites like the Asexual Visibility and Education Network and social media to distribute survey questions and collect data about the asexual community. Their 2021 survey, the most recent for which summary results are available at the time of writing this thesis, received 12,226 valid responses internationally, 94.5% of whom identified as asexual (Ace Community Survey Team, 2023).

As discussed above, asexuality can coexist with romantic orientations, and distinguishing between sexual and romantic orientations may help resolve theoretical challenges in the conceptualization of asexuality (DeLuzio Chasin, 2011). Research suggests that romantic orientations among asexual people range widely, with substantial populations of heteroromantic, biromantic, homoromantic, and aromantic asexual people existing within a sample of over 4000 asexual people compiled from prior studies (Antonsen et al., 2020). Identification with the LGBTQ+ community for many of those people would seem apparent, especially for asexual people with biromantic, homoromantic, or other queer romantic orientations. However, heteroromantic asexual peoples' degree of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community is unclear because their relationship formations often appear straight in nearly every respect. In addition,

research findings are mixed with respect to the question of how connected asexual people feel to the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, some research suggests that asexual people, compared to other LGBTQ+ people, are lowest in connectedness to the LGBTQ+ community and self-acceptance (Pluckhan, 2023). However, other findings identify no differences in the connectedness of asexual people and allosexual sexual minorities to the LGB community (Rothblum et al., 2020). As such, our research evaluates whether allosexual peoples' perceptions of asexual men are more similar to gay men or straight men.

Asexuality and Hegemonic Masculinity

The majority of asexual-identifying people are women. Across over 11,000 responses to the 2021 ACS survey, 54.5% of asexual respondents identified as women. By contrast, only 14.7% of the asexual respondents identified as men, and 30.8% identified as agender, genderqueer, another nonbinary identity, or questioning/unsure (ACST, 2023). The gendered expectation that men are more sexual than women may contribute to the disparity, driving men away from the asexual identity due to stigmatization leading to fear that admitting to a lack of sexual desire may provide a basis for inferences about masculine shortcomings (Robbins et al., 2016; Rothblum et al., 2020).

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the idealized form of masculinity within a given culture (Connell, 1995). Within the United States, hegemonic masculinity proscribes that ideal men are high in power, status, and dominance/control, and proscribes that men should be nothing like women (Vescio & Schermerhorn, 2021). In other words, hegemonic masculine ideals require that men distance themselves from anything considered to be gay or feminine, because of the stereotypic dichotomy of men and women within the gender binary (Vescio & Schermerhorn,

2021). One way men are expected to be powerful and dominant is sexually (Dahl et al., 2015), which suggests that asexual men would not be considered “good men” in a hegemonic masculinity structure. By contrast, women are forced into categories given the Madonna-Whore dichotomy; women are regarded as either “good,” chaste, and pure “Madonnas”, or “bad,” promiscuous, seductive “whores” (Bareket et al., 2018). As a result, a man who is non-sexual may also be viewed as womanly and unmanly. Consistent with this notion, sexual desire has been conceptualized to be a part of the hegemonic masculinity concept (Vescio & Kosakowska-Berezecka, 2020).

Like any sexual minority, asexuality interacts in a myriad of ways with gender, and the experiences of men, women, transgender, and non-binary people who identify as asexual often vary greatly (Cuthbert, 2022). In the present research, we focused on asexual men in an effort to study not only reactions to violence against asexual people, but also the compulsory sexuality inherent to hegemonic masculinity, and how one might interact with masculinity if one experienced little to no sexual attraction.

Discrimination Against and Dehumanization of Asexual People

There is clear and unambiguous evidence that asexual people face prejudice and discrimination. In fact, two different studies provide findings that converge, showing the frequency and content of the discriminatory experiences of asexual people.

Relatively recently, a scale measuring bias (but not direct violent intentions) against asexual people was developed by assessing reactions to statements such as “asexuality is an inferior form of sexuality” and “asexuality is a ‘problem’ or ‘defect’” (Hoffarth et al., 2015). It produced statistically significant correlations supporting convergent validity. Specifically, anti-

asexual bias was significantly correlated to both Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation. Anti-asexual bias was also found to correlate with sexism and endorsement of traditional gender norms (Hoffarth et al., 2015). The content of the items on the scale and convergent evidence suggest that asexual people are targets of substantial bias, discrimination, and violence. However, the exact frequency was not documented in this work. To assess the frequency and content of specific acts of violence, we turn attention to the largest study of asexual people; as noted above, the Ace Community Survey is the largest study of asexual people, with more than 1200 responses, 94.5% of whom identified as asexual.

The ACS identified the most common forms of discrimination experienced by asexual people. These included excessive and inappropriate personal questions (44% experienced this), attempts to “fix” or “cure” respondents (41%), and verbal harassment (36%) based on their sexual or romantic orientation (ACST, 2023). However, as we have established, asexual individuals may also have other identities within the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans; Antonsen et al., 2020), and the survey’s phrasing did not appear to distinguish between those identities when it asked about discrimination. As a result, it is hard to tell whether all of the reported incidents in the ACS were based solely or even primarily on a respondent’s asexual identity. Therefore, in our study we experimentally manipulated information about a man’s sexual orientation to isolate asexuality from other identities which could impact violence.

Moving attention from self-reported experiences of discrimination to experimental examinations of actual behavior, recent experimental research documents that allosexual people both discriminate against asexual people and dehumanize asexual people. Specifically, MacInnis and Hodson (2012) conducted two studies examining bias toward asexual people: one among a college student population and one among a general population sample. Participants in each

study completed attitude thermometers indicating their feelings about asexual people, trait- and emotion-based dehumanization measures, and measures of future contact intentions and discrimination intentions. Participants completed these measures for heterosexual people, homosexual people, bisexual people, and asexual people. They found that asexual people were judged more negatively than straight people, and that straight people demonstrated a willingness to discriminate against asexual people in terms of renting and hiring practices and future contact intentions. Asexual people were also perceived as less human than straight people and gay and bisexual people, across both measures of uniquely human traits and traits participants associated with human nature. The study ruled out alternative explanations for their findings, such as well-known biases against unfamiliar groups or uncoupled people (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012).

Hypotheses and The Present Research

We sought to extend the theory and research of MacInnis and Hodson (2012) by examining whether the dehumanization of asexual men, relative to gay men and straight men, influenced perceptions of violence or justification when violence occurred. Toward that end, we considered the kinds of discrimination experienced by asexual people reviewed above, and we considered those findings in the context of the kinds of violence that have been found to be directed toward LGBTQ+ people more generally. Franklin (2000) conducted a study evaluating the frequency and motivations of antigay behaviors among a sample of community college students in California. Participants anonymously responded to a series of measures, notably including the Antigay Behavior Inventory, which collected participants' descriptions of antigay behaviors which they had either perpetrated or witnessed, frequencies of those antigay behaviors, and motivations for antigay behaviors they perpetrated if applicable. The study found name

calling to be the most common behavior by far, followed by threats, physical attacks, throwing objects, chasing or following, and damaging property (Franklin, 2000). Several of these findings overlapped with types of discrimination reported to the ACS reviewed above (ACST, 2023). Based on these factors, our research examined how allosexual people would perceive verbal harassment, physical violence, or property violence directed at an asexual man, a gay man, or a straight man.

If allosexual people dehumanize asexual (as opposed to gay or straight) people—viewing them as less uniquely human, as documented by MacInnis and Hodson (2012)—then they should perceive asexual people as being less harmed by discrimination and violence (Haslam & Loughnan, 2016). Research has shown that when a group is dehumanized, or infrahumanized (the perception that uniquely human traits belong only to one's ingroup) they are denied the experience of a full range of emotions by the perceiver (Cuddy et al., 2007). Therefore, dehumanization is regarded as a critical aspect of intergroup violence, as it serves to exclude moral consequences for actions perpetrated against a group. For instance, one study demonstrated that participants who were primed with the dehumanizing stereotype associating Black people with apes and then shown a video of a police officer assaulting a Black person were more likely to view the violence as justified (Goff et al., 2008). Dehumanization can serve not only to justify violence, but to minimize perceptions of harm. For example, dehumanization has perpetuated the myth that Black people have higher pain tolerances than white people do, which continues to impact contemporary medicine practices (Campbell, 2021). Thus, in line with evidence that asexual men are the most dehumanized group of any sexual minority (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012), we hypothesized that straight men would be regarded as the most harmed group

when an act of violence was perpetrated against them, followed by gay men, with asexual men viewed as the least harmed group.

Previous research has shown that when an act is perceived as intentional and harmful, an act is more likely to be judged as discrimination and the perpetrator is more likely to be perceived as prejudiced (Swim et al., 2003). We predict that this pattern should hold in situations in which discrimination takes violent forms. Therefore, we also predicted that violence against asexual man would be viewed as the least intentional, that asexual men would be blamed the most for the attack, that asexual men would be regarded as the least credible of the three victims, and that attacks against asexual men would elicit the least support for perpetrator punishment and the lowest likelihood that a crime had been committed. As with perceived harm, we hypothesized that straight men would fall at the opposite extreme for each variable, with gay men falling in between the other two.

Importantly, perceiving an act to be more harmful and intentional is associated with attributions of blame. For instance, people judge others as more blameworthy when their actions are known (vs. not known) to have the potential to cause harm (Lagnado & Channon, 2008) and harmful and intentional acts are more likely to be labeled as discriminatory and unjust (Swim et al., 2003). Based on these findings, we hypothesized acts of violence would be perceived as less harmful and less intentional when victims were asexual men (as opposed to either gay or straight men); as shown below in **Figure 1**, we also predicted that less perceived harm would be associated with greater victim blaming, less victim credibility, less perpetrator punishment, and lesser likelihood of labeling the violence a crime.

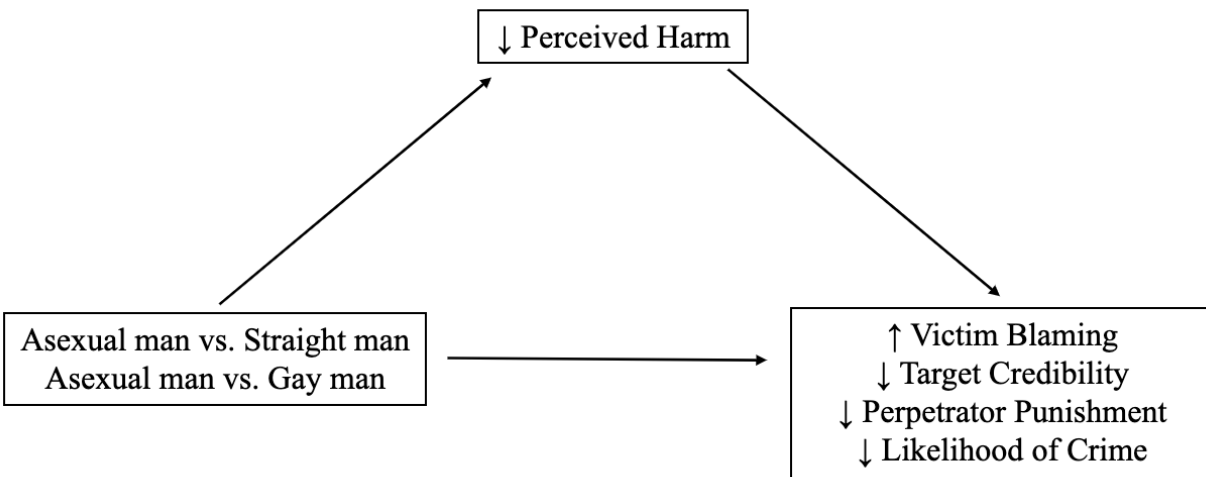


Figure 1: Diagram of Hypotheses

To test predictions, we used a target sexual orientation (asexual man, gay man, straight man) type of violence (physical, property, verbal) between-participants design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of nine experimental conditions and read a vignette describing violence against either an asexual man, a straight man, or a gay man. Participants then reported their perceptions of the situation. We evaluated how harmed participants believed the victim to be, how eager they were to punish the alleged perpetrator of the act, how credible they believed the victim of the act to be in reporting its occurrence, and the likelihood that they thought the violence was a crime.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 845 undergraduates from a large Northeastern university's undergraduate body. The Qualtrics survey was posted on an online SONA system, and participants were offered partial course credit fulfilling psychology course requirements in exchange for their participation. The responses of twelve participants who did not complete at least half of the dependent variables were dropped from the working data set. No systemic pattern existed for which condition this happened in; eight did not get far enough to be assigned to an experimental condition, and the four that were far enough along to be assigned to a condition had received four distinct conditions prior to exiting the survey. We also omitted the responses of 62 participants who failed the manipulation check, and the responses of six who did not respond to the manipulation check. These participants represented 8.20% of the respondents and included 22 women and 46 men. The responses of seven participants were dropped because they either did not indicate their gender or indicated a non-binary gender identity; because we did not have enough people identifying as non-binary or agender to create a separate category of analysis, their data was dropped, since several of our analyses relied on participant gender. After these exclusions, the working data set was comprised of the responses of 758 participants, including 352 men and 406 women. ($M_{age} = 18.91$ years, $sd = 1.44$; 76.4% White, 12.7% Hispanic or Latino, 10.9% Asian, 10.7% Black, 2.9% Other Non-White identity; 87.2% Straight (heterosexual), 7.1% Bisexual, 4.6% other sexual orientations, 1.1% Questioning or Unsure).

Procedure and Design

Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey. Surveys were completed outside of a lab setting at the participant's own pace. Participants were randomly assigned to one of nine possible conditions in a target sexual orientation (straight, gay, or asexual) type of violence (verbal harassment, property violence, or physical violence) between-participants design. In each condition, participants read about an asexual man, a gay man, or a straight man who was a target of verbal, property, or physical violence. Word count, sentence count, and sentence structure were consistent across conditions.

Participants read an event that happened to Andrew. The event described involved one of three kinds of violence. In all three conditions, Andrew was described as walking home from a vague work or leisure event. In the verbal harassment condition, a man yelled at Andrew from across the street, using unspecified profanities and name-calling before running away. In the property violence condition, the man approached Andrew, took a backpack from him, and smashed it on the pavement in front of him, damaging his possessions before running away. In the physical violence condition, the man approached Andrew, punched him in the face, and shoved him down on to the pavement before running away. Andrew was also described as either an asexual man, a gay man, or a straight man. No reaction was assigned to the victim so as not to tamper with dehumanization, if present. The name "Andrew" was selected to represent the victim because it was high on a [list by the U.S. Government Social Security office](#) of most common male baby names of 2003, and thus seemed unlikely to impact college-age participants' responses. The types of violence were selected based on the types of violence reported by LGBTQ people who completed the Franklin's Antigay Behaviors Inventory (Franklin, 2000). Full copies of the vignettes are contained in **Appendix A**.

Dependent Variables

After reading their assigned vignette, participants were asked to complete measures of perceived harm, intentionality, target credibility, victim blaming, support for perpetrator punishment, and likelihood that a crime occurred. Participants also completed an attention check, and a manipulation check, which requested participants report the sexual orientation of the target. Finally, participants provided basic demographic information, such as their age, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The complete survey as well as demographic information is contained in **Appendix B**.

Perceptions of Harm to Target. Three items assessed participants' perceptions of harm to the target: "Andrew was harmed", "The encounter was stressful to Andrew", and "It's likely that the encounter made Andrew feel unsafe" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .73$). We averaged across the three items to create a perceptions of harm variable; higher numbers indicate greater harm to target.

Perpetrator Intent. Three items assessed participants' perceptions of the perpetrator's intent: "The man intended to make Andrew feel uncomfortable", "The man intended to make Andrew feel unsafe", and "The man intended to harm Andrew" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .78$). We averaged across the three items to create an intent variable; higher numbers indicate greater belief that the perpetrator intended the harm.

Target Credibility. Four items assessed participants' perceptions of the target's credibility in reporting the act: "Do you think that Andrew is believable?", "Do you get the impression that Andrew is telling the truth?", "Does Andrew's description of the incident seem like a good source of information?", and "Do you think that Andrew is making a false statement?" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .86$). We averaged across the four

items (reverse coding the fourth item before doing so) to create a target credibility variable; higher numbers indicate greater credibility on the part of the target.

Victim Blaming. Four items assessed blame participants assigned to the victim for the incident: “Andrew probably would not have been targeted if he had presented himself in a different way”, “Andrew deserved what he got”, “It is likely that Andrew behaved in a way that caused the violence”, and “Andrew was likely targeted because of the way he presents himself” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .69$). We averaged across the four items to create a victim blaming variable; higher numbers indicate more blame assigned to the victim.

Support for Perpetrator Punishment. Four items assessed participants’ willingness to punish the perpetrator for their actions: “I think the man should be arrested”, “I think the man should be charged with a crime”, “The man should apologize for the encounter with Andrew”, and “I think the man should be punished for the encounter with Andrew” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .85$). We averaged across the four items to create a perpetrator punishment variable; higher numbers indicate greater support to punish the perpetrator.

Likelihood of a Crime. Seven items assessed participants’ assessment of whether a crime occurred: “In your opinion, how likely was it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew broke the law?”, “How likely is it that the man felt threatened by Andrew?”, “In your opinion, how likely was it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew behaved inappropriately?”, “How likely is it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew misunderstood the situation?”, “How likely is it that the man confused Andrew with someone else?”, and “In my opinion, Andrew was the victim” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .67$). After reverse coding the second, fourth, fifth and sixth items, we averaged across the

three items to create a likelihood of crime variable; higher numbers indicate greater likelihood that a crime occurred.

Results

Each variable (perceived harm, intent, target credibility, victim blaming, support for perpetrator punishment, and likelihood of crime) was submitted to a target sexual orientation (asexual, gay, straight) by type of violence (physical, verbal, property) by participant gender (male, female) between participants Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Main effects of each independent variable emerged from analyses.

A main effect of participant gender emerged on each dependent variable. As shown in **Table 1**, women perceived greater harm to the victim, greater intent by the perpetrator, viewed the victim as more credible, and blamed the victim less. Women also supported greater perpetrator punishment and were more likely to view the act as a crime.

A type of violence main effect also emerged for every dependent variable except target credibility. The pattern of mean differences that emerged across physical violence, property violence, and verbal violence differed across variables. Therefore, I discuss variables with similar patterns of differences together. As shown in **Table 2**, perceived harm and support for perpetrator violence were both greater with physical violence than property violence and for property violence than verbal violence. Intent was higher for physical violence than property and verbal violence, which did not differ from one another. Interestingly, victim blaming was significantly higher in the verbal violence condition than in the other two conditions. However, participants were less likely to see the act as a crime in the verbal violence condition than the other two conditions, which did not differ from one another.

Notably, we did find a main effect for our primary hypothesized variable—target sexual orientation—on each variable; however, the effect was in a direction opposite from what we

anticipated. Contrary to our hypothesis that asexual and gay victims would be perceived as less harmed than straight victims, straight victims were perceived to be significantly less harmed than the two sexual minority groups were, as shown in **Table 3**. Alongside this finding, participants reported less intentionality for acts perpetrated against straight victims. Straight victims were regarded as less credible than gay victims, though asexual victims were regarded somewhere in between the two groups and did not differ significantly from either at $p < .05$ (asexual and straight victims differed at $p = .051$). Participants also offered less support for perpetrator punishment and found it less likely that a crime had occurred. Participants did engage in more victim blaming when presented with an asexual or gay victim than a straight victim.

The only other effects to emerge from ANOVAs were two two-way interactions. There was a significant interaction between type of violence and participant gender on harm, $F(2,740) = 4.73$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$. As shown in **Table 4**, women perceived acts to be more harmful than did men in the property violence condition and the verbal harassment condition, but not the physical violence condition. There was also a significant interaction between target sexual orientation and participant gender on target credibility $F(2,740) = 3.12$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$. As shown in **Table 5** compared to men, women consistently perceived victims of violence to be more credible. In addition, although men's ratings of credibility did not vary as a function of the victims sexual orientation, women perceived gay men as more credible than both asexual men.

Interestingly, we did not find the predicted direct effects on harm or the other outcome variables. Therefore, the model that we had hypothesized and presented in the introduction is not viable and required no further analyses to test the model.

Discussion

We predicted that, as a result of dehumanization, participants would assign the least perceived harm to asexual victims, and accordingly demonstrate the most victim blaming and least willingness to punish the perpetrator. This was based on a theorized direct link between our dependent variables and the levels of dehumanization found in MacInnis and Hodson's study (2012). As such, we expected higher levels of perceived harm and willingness to punish the perpetrator when the victim was straight. We also predicted that the gay victim would fall in between the asexual and straight victim on all of those measures, again in lockstep with MacInnis and Hodson's work. We did not anticipate intervening factors between the previously established dehumanization and the ways in which participants interacted with violent acts. Given our contrary finding to our hypothesis, our proposed model is declared not viable, and no reason exists to test it further.

The absence of this theorized link between dehumanization and greater acceptance of violent acts toward asexual people likely means one of two things: the link still exists and our study failed to capture it, or the link does not exist, and one or more factors interfere somewhere in between dehumanization and real-world violence. We start with the former possibility. Evaluating the experiences of asexual people compared to other sexual minorities is complicated in numerous ways. One factor is simply that asexuality is not well-known compared to other sexual orientation groups such as gay and bisexual people. That factor has importance when evaluating the potential for prejudice, and research shows us that knowing what asexuality is, and especially knowing an asexual person in one's personal life correlates with decreased

prejudice toward asexual peoples (Hoffarth et al., 2015). We did not ask participants about prior knowledge of asexuality. Only five participants reported their sexual orientation as asexual or aromantic, and beyond those participants we have no way of knowing how many of our participants were familiar with the identity prior to our study. It is possible that a college-age sample would be more likely to be familiar with the identity, and thus less likely to exhibit prejudices found in general population studies.

The one variable which did somewhat conform to our predictions was victim blaming. While victim blaming was fairly low across the board, not exceeding a mean of 3 on the 7-point scale for even the highest of conditions, there was a significant difference between each target sexual orientation. The most victim blaming was directed at gay victims, while the least was directed at straight victims, and asexual victims fell in between, differing significantly from both other orientations. However, those results may not reflect a tendency to blame sexual minorities for acts perpetrated against them so much as it reflects participants' attempts to rationalize the vignette presented to them. As you can see in the vignettes in **Appendix A**, vignettes did not contain any clear explanation for why the perpetrator might be committing the act. It is possible that the sentence introducing the victim's sexual orientation ended up being interpreted as an explanation for the act. In other words, participants in the condition with the gay or asexual victim may have rationalized the situation as an attack rooted in prejudice and responded to "victim blaming" questions on that basis. This might also explain why asexual victims were blamed less than gay victims; while stereotypes about asexual people do exist (Zivony & Reggev, 2023), they don't tend to relate to physical, outward presentation, and thus participants may have found it less likely that the asexual victim could be targeted "because of how he presented himself", as one of the prompts read.

Perhaps, however, our results should be taken as an indication that factors other than outgroup dehumanization motivate prejudice and violence against sexual minority groups, and those factors require more research with regard to asexuality. The key theoretical difference between asexuality and many other sexual minority identities is that asexuality is characterized by an *absence* of heteronormatively expected attractions, rather than the presence of attractions contrary to that expectation. Consequently, if asexual people are viewed as less human than any other sexual orientation group (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012), but are not met with the same justifications for violence perpetrated against them, that implies a more complicated link between dehumanization and violence than our model predicted, and one or more points along that link may not apply to asexual individuals in full (or in any part for that matter). The flaw in that logic as pertains to this study is that even if there was something unique about the connection of asexual dehumanization to violence justification, we would still expect gay victims—previously perceived as less human than straight individuals (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012)—to be perceived as less harmed than straight victims, and we found the exact opposite. For this reason, our findings are likely explained by a different factor entirely and may be largely unrelated to dehumanization.

Masculinity as a social identity requires men to be powerful and dominant (Vescio & Kosakowska-Berezecka, 2020; Vescio & Schermerhorn, 2021), and thus carries with it a certain expectation of self-sufficiency when presented with conflict. It is possible that this explains our findings that straight men were perceived as less harmed and less worthy of perpetrator punishment when they were victimized. Given the assumption that being a “good man” (in the sense of adhering to masculinity standards) means one must be heterosexual, gay men are not “good men” (Vescio & Schermerhorn, 2021) and thus would not be held to the same

expectations of power and dominance as straight men are. Given the participants were given no other information, the straight man is most interpretable as a “good man” in our study, and thus would be most expected to hold his own ground and not need any help at any of the three levels of antagonism.

One point discussed in the introduction was where asexual men might fall into traditional conceptualizations of masculinity; by definition (at least in concept), they’re not engaging in behaviors contrary to heterosexuality, but they also do not exhibit heterosexual behaviors. Our data suggests that asexual men are not regarded as “good men” based on hegemonic masculine structures. Participants viewed asexual victims much more similarly to gay victims than to straight victims; on all dependent variables except for target credibility and victim blaming, the asexual victim’s means did not differ significantly from the gay victim’s, but both differed significantly from the straight victim’s. In one variable (credibility) asexual men were viewed somewhere in between the other two, but otherwise there was a clear link between response to the asexual and gay victim, with the straight victim differing significantly. This gives support to the idea that asexual men can be conceptualized as being part of the LGBTQ+ community in future research; despite valid conceptual differences between asexuality and other sexual minority identities which should be kept in mind as research continues, it appears that asexual men are categorized similarly to gay men (and presumably, men of other sexual minority identities) by the general population.

Links between asexuality and perceptions of harm should absolutely be explored with regard to people of other gender identities than men, and nothing about our focus in this paper should be taken to suggest that the asexual man’s experience is a uniquely important one. In fact, as discussed earlier, asexual men appear to make up a relatively small percentage of the asexual

community (Ace Community Survey Team, 2023), so while examining their experiences does help us to understand how asexuality might interact with masculinity constructs, it leaves a need for further research addressing asexual women, the reported majority in the community, and people of various nonbinary identities, who also make up a significant percentage of the community (Ace Community Survey Team, 2023).

Given the possibly significant impact of masculinity standards on our results, it appears all the more critical that similar constructs be studied with asexual people of all genders, and not just asexual men. While straight men might see violence against them minimized due to expectations about their masculinity, straight women should not experience the same effect. Thus, if our theory of gender role impacts on this data is correct, a similar study using vignettes with female or neutrally identified victims might expect to find no difference across target sexual orientations, given the rejection of our hypothesis in this study.

While violence against asexual victims was not minimized in line with dehumanization as we predicted, this should not mark the end of study into the impacts and prevalence of violence and discrimination toward asexual people. The attacks described in our vignettes are not without precedent, as 36% of asexual respondents to the 2021 ACS reported enduring some form of verbal harassment, and a small but nonetheless concerning 3.6% reported some form of physical harassment or violence against them, with 41.9% reporting some form of bullying or other form of discrimination across the board. Particularly appallingly, 12.5% of respondents indicated they had been sexually harassed as a result of their identity, and an additional 7.6% reported that they might have been and they were unsure (ACST, 2023). Our study did not address sexual violence or harassment, but it does represent a direction for future research. It is difficult to predict if our results would be replicated with differently gendered victims and different acts, but it is plausible

that the dehumanization discovered by MacInnis and Hodson (2012) could play a role in responses to sexual harassment or violence.

Meanwhile, while far from the topic we originally set out to study, the idea that antagonism toward straight men might be met with more ambivalence than it would be if directed at other groups is troubling. One need not be a member of a marginalized group to be harmed by violence or harassment, and the risk that masculinity standards could lead to a decrease in perceived harm warrants further examination. That said, our analyses do not have a way of assigning an appropriate level of perceived harm to each situation, and our only benchmarks are to compare different target sexual orientation groups to each other. It's possible that sensitivity to violence against sexual minorities among our student sample just served to elevate their concern for the gay and asexual victims, rather than diminish it per se for the straight victim. Neither conclusion can be affirmed or ruled out without further study, and they could certainly coexist to bring about the patterns we observe.

Table 1: Effects by Participant Gender

Variable	Men's Mean (SD)	Women's Mean (SD)	<i>F</i> – ratio (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i> - value	η_p^2
Harm	5.86 (.05)	6.23 (.05)	31.32 (1, 740)	< .001	.041
Intent	5.58 (.06)	6.01 (.05)	33.08 (1, 740)	< .001	.043
Target Credibility	5.11 (.06)	5.78 (.05)	74.90 (1, 740)	< .001	.092
Victim Blaming	2.81 (.05)	2.37 (.05)	36.62 (1, 740)	< .001	.047
Perpetrator Punishment	5.10 (.05)	5.39 (.05)	15.71 (1, 740)	< .001	.021
Likelihood of Crime	5.25 (.04)	5.39 (.04)	5.67 (1, 740)	.018	.008

Table 2: Effects by Type of Violence

Variable	Verbal Mean (SD)	Property Mean (SD)	Physical Mean (SD)	<i>F</i> – ratio (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i> - value	η_p^2
Harm	5.54 ^a (.06)	5.99 ^b (.06)	6.60 ^c (.06)	88.58 (2, 740)	< .001	.193
Intent	5.55 ^a (.06)	5.54 ^a (.07)	6.31 ^b (.07)	47.77 (2, 740)	< .001	.114
Target Credibility	5.48 (.07)	5.39 (.07)	5.46 (.07)	.575 (2, 740)	.563	.002
Victim Blaming	2.97 ^a (.06)	2.41 ^b (.06)	2.41 ^b (.06)	26.58 (2, 740)	< .001	.067

Perpetrator Punishment	4.00 ^a (.06)	5.66 ^b (.07)	6.08 ^c (.06)	301.39 (2, 740)	< .001	.449
Likelihood of Crime	5.08 ^a (.05)	5.50 ^b (.05)	5.37 ^b (.05)	16.51 (2, 740)	< .001	.043

Note: For each dependent variable, means with different superscripts significantly differ at $p < .05$.

Table 3: Effects by Target Sexual Orientation

Variable	Straight Mean (SD)	Gay Mean (SD)	Asexual Mean (SD)	F – ratio (df)	p - value	η_p^2
Harm	5.86 ^a (.06)	6.15 ^b (.06)	6.11 ^b (.06)	7.70 (2, 740)	< .001	.020
Intent	5.61 ^a (.07)	5.92 ^b (.06)	5.86 ^b (.07)	6.79 (2, 740)	.001	.018
Target Credibility	5.30 ^a (.07)	5.55 ^b (.07)	5.49 ^{ab} (.07)	3.77 (2, 740)	.023	.010
Victim Blaming	2.29 ^a (.06)	2.92 ^b (.06)	2.58 ^c (.06)	25.42 (2, 740)	< .001	.064
Perpetrator Punishment	5.08 ^a (.06)	5.29 ^b (.06)	5.37 ^b (.07)	5.18 (2, 740)	.006	.014
Likelihood of Crime	5.09 ^a (.05)	5.41 ^b (.05)	5.45 ^b (.05)	13.66 (2, 740)	< .001	.036

Note: For each dependent variable, means with different superscripts significantly differ at $p < .05$.

Table 4: Perceived Harm by Participant Gender and Type of Violence

Participant Gender	Verbal Harassment Harm Perceived	Property Violence Harm Perceived	Physical Violence Harm Perceived
Men's Mean (SD)	5.22 ^a (.08)	5.84 ^b (.08)	6.52 ^c (.08)

Women's Mean (SD)	5.86 ^d (.08)	6.14 ^e (.08)	6.67 ^c (.08)
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Note: For each dependent variable, means with different superscripts significantly differ at $p < .05$.

Table 5: Target Credibility by Participant Gender and Target Sexual Orientation

Participant Gender	Straight Target Credibility	Gay Target Credibility	Asexual Target Credibility
Men's Mean (SD)	5.02 ^a (.10)	5.08 ^a (.10)	5.22 ^a (.10)
Women's Mean (SD)	5.57 ^b (.09)	6.02 ^c (.09)	5.75 ^b (.09)

Note: For each dependent variable, means with different superscripts significantly differ at $p < .05$.

Appendix A

Vignettes

For each condition, the participant would have been randomly assigned one of the three sexual orientation groups described by the colored and italicized text. The straight orientation description contains one less word (11 as opposed to 12) than the gay or asexual descriptions, which explains the one-word variance in reported word counts. All vignettes are six sentences long.

Verbal Harassment: 75-76 words

Andrew was walking home from work one day when he heard someone yelling at him. *Andrew identifies as straight (heterosexual), meaning he is attracted to women* / *Andrew identifies as gay (homosexual), meaning he is attracted to other men* / *Andrew identifies as asexual, meaning he does not feel attraction toward anyone*. When he looked up, he saw a man standing across the street glaring at him. The man started yelling profanities at Andrew. He insulted Andrew's clothes and appearance, gesturing at him and calling him various names. Then, he turned and ran away before Andrew had a chance to react.

Property Violence: 78-79 words

On his walk home from a meeting, Andrew saw someone approaching him. *Andrew identifies as straight (heterosexual), meaning he is attracted to women* / *Andrew identifies as gay (homosexual), meaning he is attracted to other men* / *Andrew identifies as asexual, meaning he does not feel attraction toward anyone*. The man who was moving toward him got closer until he was right in front of Andrew. Then, he grabbed Andrew's backpack away from him. He proceeded to smash it on the street, damaging the things Andrew had inside the bag. He dropped the bag and ran off before Andrew had a chance to react.

Physical Violence: 73-74 words

While walking home from the park one day, Andrew suddenly heard footsteps behind him. *Andrew identifies as straight (heterosexual), meaning he is attracted to women / Andrew identifies as gay (homosexual), meaning he is attracted to other men / Andrew identifies as asexual, meaning he does not feel attraction toward anyone.* Turning around, Andrew saw a man getting closer to him. The man walked up to Andrew, then wound up and punched him in the face. Then, he shoved Andrew, who fell backwards onto the pavement. He turned and ran away again before Andrew had a chance to react.

Appendix B

Measures of Dependent Variables

All measures were completed with a 7-point Likert scale utilizing “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Somewhat Disagree”, “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, “Somewhat Agree”, “Agree”, and “Strongly Agree”. All sections were prompted by the phrase “Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements”.

Harm:

1. Andrew was harmed.
2. The encounter was stressful to Andrew.
3. It’s likely that the encounter made Andrew feel unsafe.

Intentionality:

1. The man intended to make Andrew feel uncomfortable.
2. The man intended to make the [sic] Andrew feel unsafe.
3. The man intended to harm Andrew.

Target Credibility:

1. Do you think that Andrew is believable?
2. Do you get the impression that the [sic] Andrew is telling the truth?
3. Does Andrew’s description of the incident seem like a good source of information?
4. Do you think that Andrew is making a false statement? (*Reverse Coded*)

Victim Blaming:

1. Andrew probably would not have been targeted if he had presented himself in a different way.
2. Andrew deserved what he got.
3. It is likely that Andrew behaved in a way that caused the violence.
4. Andrew was likely targeted because of the way he presents himself.

Support for Perpetrator Punishment:

1. I think the man should be arrested.
2. I think the man should be charged with a crime.
3. The man should apologize for the encounter with Andrew.
4. I think the man should be punished for the encounter with Andrew.

Likelihood of a Crime:

1. In your opinion, how likely was it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew broke the law?
2. How likely is it that the man felt threatened by Andrew? (*Reverse Coded*)
3. In your opinion, how likely was it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew behaved inappropriately?
4. How likely is it that the man was defending himself from Andrew? (*Reverse Coded*)
5. How likely was it that the man involved in the encounter with Andrew misunderstood the situation? (*Reverse Coded*)
6. How likely is it that the man confused Andrew with someone else? (*Reverse Coded*)
7. In my opinion, the [sic] Andrew was the victim.

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