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*Spongebob Squarepants:*  
How the Sea Sponge Became a Vital Member of the LGBTQIA+ Community

In June of 2020, Nickelodeon posted a celebratory tweet to acknowledge and stand with the LGBTQIA+ community for Pride Month. This post included three characters, the first two were Michael D. Cohen, an openly transgender actor that stars in *Henry Danger*, and Korra, the main protagonist in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, who was previously established as bisexual in her show. However, the character who sparked headlines and created the most conversation was Spongebob Squarepants. His photo, like the other two, was depicted with a seemingly iridescent rainbow background and the caption read “Celebrating #Pride with the LGBTQ+ community and their allies this month and every month” (Nickelodeon). Followers were quick to begin circulating the tweet, sharing their thoughts on the long-running pop-culture icon being confirmed by Nickelodeon as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. There appeared to be some debate, some speculating that he was merely an ally, while others saw the post as a confirmation that Spongebob Squarepants was gay or homosexual. However, while Spongebob is a queer character, his sexuality is not simply straight nor gay. As confirmed by the creator, Stephen Hillenburg, in 2005, “[he] always thought of the character as almost asexual.” Additionally, Spongebob is an actual sea sponge, a species which reproduces both asexually and sexually. The animal is a prominent factor in the characterization and expression of Spongebob that has not yet

been explored. The television series *Spongebob Squarepants* and the character himself have been utilized to generate discussions to analyze same-sex relationships and speculate the character's queerness, but not specifically his asexual identity or the asexual animal he is based in. This essay attempts to begin this conversation and argues that Spongebob has a homoromantic asexual identity, which adds a deeper level of understanding and importance to the characterization and cultural impact of the series *Spongebob Squarepants* by effectively demonstrating how asexual individuals can still express same-sex desire. It also factors in the sea sponge as an aquatic animal, and how it contributes to his identity and gender expression. *Spongebob Squarepants* creates an enticing underwater world in which LGBTQIA+, specifically asexual, youth can both laugh and identify with while providing cultural awareness that adults may utilize to engage and discuss gender, sexuality, and relationships.

*Spongebob Squarepants* began in 1999 and continuously stays relevant to pop culture due to not only its timeless comedy but relatable characters that allow viewers to both see and express themselves. The long-running show creates a multi-generational impact, where children watch the series for comedic effect or even moral values such as kindness and friendship, while some adults continue watching for relief and nostalgia (Rice). Scholar Jonah Lee Rice, a Division Chairperson at Southeastern Illinois College, questions how this strong impact came to be, and why it has lasted for so long. He speculates: “character identification with the ironic yet lovable loser is powerful and perhaps reflective of a world in which there is a need to recognize being common is not necessarily equated with being a loser” (Rice). Spongebob is simply a fry cook who enjoys spending time with his best friend, makes multiple mistakes, and has no specific powers or superiority over his peers, yet he is still the main character who pilots the show. Rice is identifying that the people who watch *Spongebob Squarepants* love the character

because he is flawed in the same sense of themselves. This connection can be seen in media sites such as Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, and Twitter where clips, screenshots, and audio from multiple episodes still circulate. Users create “Spongebob memes” to make funny or relatable jokes, as well as to convey and share certain emotions through a comedic lens. In this odd sense, users are presenting Spongebob as an extension of themselves, showing their sense of humor and sometimes deeper feelings. The series and characters prominently affect viewers, and this ability to mirror reality for both children and adults provides the foundation for a lasting impact through representation.

*Spongebob Squarepants*'s general lessons in social importance paved the way for his representation within the LGBTQIA+ community. In her dissertation titled “Constructing Gender and Relationships in ‘SpongeBob SquarePants’: Who Lives in a Pineapple under the Sea?” Allison C. Carter describes how these lessons allowed room for the implicit same-sex desires within the series: “It shapes content and relationships in such a way that the subversion of these dominant norms often goes unchecked. The relationships in *SpongeBob SquarePants* do send explicit messages promoting the importance of friendship” (32). Carter explains that the typical friendship-centered morals and depictions historically allowed room for the producers to imply, and even get away with the representations of same-sex desire. Similarly, scholar Jeffery P. Dennis, a former professor of gender studies at Minnesota State University says, “In the early 1990s, animated cartoons began to make sly references to the presence of same-sex desire” (135). Cartoons, such as *Spongebob Squarepants*, relied on implications within this time. However, his analysis tracks the 1990s, and Carter’s is from 2010. As previously discussed, Nickelodeon has effectively wiped away simple implications of Spongebob’s queerness in 2020. While the prominent messages of friendships and the lovable loser carried the show to popularity

in perhaps a less inclusive time, the channel is no longer frightened to show and even celebrate his queer identity, which can be traced his characterization and the animal that he was based in.

Stephen Hillenburg's choice in the sea sponge for Spongebob Squarepants is especially significant in the character's sexuality and even his gender expression. Despite his cartoonish rendition, Spongebob is based on the actual aquatic invertebrate commonly known as the sea sponge. Much like Spongebob, some appear to be yellowish and all of them are porous. As clarified by two professors Douglas Wilkin and Jennifer Blanchette, both boasting a Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry, "Sponges are capable of asexual reproduction. This is accomplished by one of two mechanisms: external budding or internal budding." This quote reveals how Spongebob's asexual identity is a reflection of the animal that he is based in. The animal provides background and further understanding into how and why Spongebob is asexual, rather than allowing it to be an empty statement. It generates an even deeper understanding than the confirmation from the creator, Stephen Hillenburg, and factors in biological studies with sexuality for animals and the character alike. Furthermore, "the sperm is usually produced by the male parent and the egg is produced by the female parent. However, most species of sponges are hermaphroditic, meaning that each individual can produce both eggs and sperm" (Douglass & Blanchette). In this aspect, the sea sponge serves as the foundation for Spongebob's fluidity in his gender expression. The animal is technically without a dominant sex, as it produces both gametes. Because Spongebob is drawn, perceived, and referred to as masculine, he is automatically gendered as such. However, he still challenges what it means to be masculine or feminine. This can be seen in a myriad of episodes and reviewed in future analyses. His sexuality and gender expression are often analyzed in scholarly discussions, yet this key factor in the sea

sponge's biological makeup is overlooked. Similarly, his asexual identity is not given the proper attention that it deserves.

Spongebob Squarepants can effectively depict same-sex attraction as an asexual character because his sexual orientation is not limiting. To better understand how he achieves this and still generates important and accurate discussions involving gender, sexuality, and relationships, it is important to acknowledge that asexual identities vary, and can be unique to the individual. As described by Mark Carrigan in his article "There's More to Life Than Sex? Difference and Commonality Within the Asexual Community" from the novel *Sexualities*, "Many asexuals feel attraction but without any sexual component to it, instead of regarding it as romantic and/or emotional. Others feel an attraction that is distinctly aesthetic" (468). Therefore, Spongebob still possesses the ability to showcase same-sex desire, and it does not erase or challenge his asexual identity. His representation as a character who is asexual with same-sex attraction pushes against the common mistake that one can simply demonstrate one or the other. In another quote from Carrigan, he expands: "Within this group of romantic asexuals, orientation varies: heteroromantics only feel romantic attraction to the opposite sex, homoromantics to the same sex, biromantic to both sexes and panromantics without reference to sex or gender" (469). Conversely, Spongebob Squarepants falls under the identity of an asexual homoromantic, as he demonstrates attraction and romantic actions towards the same-sex. His identity adds a different dimension to the current scholarly, and even social media discussions, revealing how sexuality truly is a spectrum with labels that are interchangeable and often ambiguous. The following analysis follows how he can show this attraction through his relationship with Patrick in episodes within the series.

The series consists of short, eleven-minute episodes where Spongebob goes on various adventures with his friends in the underwater city of Bikini Bottom. The first episode aired in May of 1999, and the series continues today in spin-offs and new seasons that are released without a specific or subsequent schedule. Mainly focusing on the relationship fostered between Spongebob and Patrick, yet deviating towards the end, the episodes analyzed will highlight Dennis's coding from his article "Perspectives: 'The Same Thing We Do Every Night': Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Cartoons" for displaying same-sex relationships: "sharing a living space or a bed; participating in social activities as a couple; being accepted as a couple by others; failing to pursue other substantive relationships, especially those with the opposite sex; rejecting romantic overtures from others; or overtly expressing desire through flirting and sexual talk" (Dennis 132). Despite demonstrating these qualities, this analysis is not to negate their asexual identities, rather to highlight how it is still possible for asexual individuals and characters to demonstrate attraction and relationships with other individuals. It will also engage with Spongebob's gender expression as caretaker and mother, reflecting on the fluidity of his gender as discussed in previous paragraphs. The episodes that will be analyzed include "Valentine's Day", where Spongebob buys Patrick a large present to celebrate the day of love, and "Rock-a-bye Bivalve", where Spongebob and Patrick raise a clam together. There will also be a brief scene analysis from the episode "20,000 Patties Under the Sea" where Spongebob bids farewell to Squidward in a certain tone, and the clip now circulates social media sites.

The episode, "Valentine's Day", showcases Spongebob's lack of desire to pursue or impress outside of his and Patrick's relationship. The episode opens with Spongebob flitting around Bikini Bottom, handing out small paper hearts, and proclaiming "Happy Valentine's Day" to all of the friends and strangers he encounters. The scene is presented as a montage to

bridge a long amount of time, and showcase the extent to which Spongebob goes to deliver each small gift. Even the scene transition is marked with a screen full of hearts to commemorate the day of love. Eventually, Spongebob makes one of his final deliveries to Sandy, where she receives a small chocolate heart from Spongebob and gives him a nut in exchange. The scene takes place in front of Sandy's tree dome, and as soon as she receives her gift, the camera pans to a massive chocolate blimp in the shape of a heart. This movement is queued by Sandy's line: "Boy Patrick sure is going to love his gift". The animators highlight the importance of Spongebob and Patrick's relationship by using Spongebob's seemingly more friendly and intimate gift exchange with Sandy as a transition for Patrick's gift reveal. It becomes obvious Spongebob shows no interest in impressing or pursuing Sandy, rather she is used as a catalyst for the storyline. In turn, she even emphasizes his desire to please and present the best gift to Patrick. This scene serves as an example of Dennis's qualifications for same-sex desire: "failing to pursue other substantive relationships, especially those with the opposite sex" (132). While Sandy is still important to Spongebob as a friend, it is ultimately Patrick that holds more importance to him. This scene also demonstrates romance quite plainly through the theme of love and grand gestures. In later episodes, Spongebob and Patrick are paired in an intense familial relationship that emphasizes their homoromantic pairing.



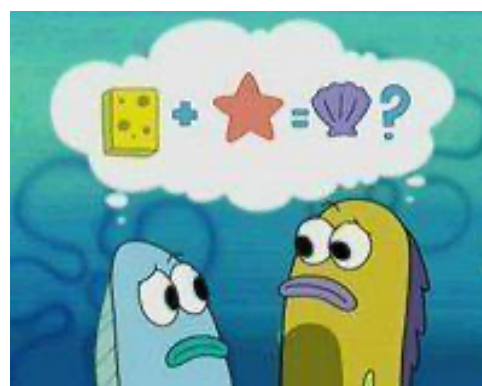
*Figure 1: Sandy and Spongebob revealing Patrick's grand present.*

Within their pairing, Spongebob begins to express his fluidity in gender and femininity early on, while Patrick remains almost toxically masculine. The opening scene of the episode “Rock-a-bye Bivalve” creates implicit, stereotypical gender roles for Spongebob and Patrick when the two become “parents” in an attempt to foster a home for a baby clam (which is akin to a baby bird in the world out of the sea). The episode begins with the two pals playing in their neighborhood, consisting of the three homes that are Spongebob’s pineapple, Patrick’s rock, and Squidward’s “Maoi.” Patrick hears a small sound and locates the culprit behind a piece of coral. Immediately, Patrick is depicted from a low-angle shot as he fills the frame, threatening to step on the baby clam, and showcasing his destructive behavior and often-times irrational thinking. On the other hand, after screaming “No!” to Patrick, Spongebob is depicted as the natural caregiver: the camera pans in on the scallop, and Spongebob is brought down to its level, quite literally, by kneeling and looking up at Patrick from a high-angle as he holds the baby clam. This shot is intimate as there is no movement behind the clam and Spongebob, and only a sandy floor surrounds them. Spongebob is cooing as he suggests that the two of them raise the baby clam together, and Patrick quickly agrees. This scene foreshadows the characters’ different “parenting” approaches: placing Spongebob in the more loving and caring role, while Patrick is



less empathetic, brash, and contributes little to nothing, yet is willing to simply go along.

Spongebob is more fluid, and therefore easier to depict as a mother, while Patrick is seemingly stuck within his gendered role as a more masculine father figure. It should be noted that neither will be referred to as a man or woman because this begins to erase their animality in already anthropomorphized roles. This scene not only demonstrates the characterization of each character as mother and father but provides an impression for the more explicitly stated family-coupling that follows in the upcoming scenes.



*Figure 2: Spongebob and Patrick going for a stroll & Figure 3: Heteronormative fish confused*

As the episode continues, Spongebob and Patrick's gendered relationship becomes more blatant as the two begin falling within Dennis's demonstrations of same-sex relationships. The two profess themselves within their roles, casting Spongebob as the mother and Patrick as the father because "he doesn't wear shirts". When the scene transitions to the two going for a stroll with their baby clam in a stroller, Patrick is dressed in business attire, which includes solely a bow-tie. Spongebob, on the other hand, is dressed in a sundress and floppy hat as he adorns women's normative clothing. The two walk side by side as upbeat music plays, and when they cross the medium-long shot from left to right, another couple counter-crosses from right to left. The couple, which is heteronormative, comprised of two fish that are male and female, pause to

think about the queer coupling of Spongebob and Patrick. A thought bubble appears above them that shows “sponge + star = clam?” in images. They eventually shrug off the encounter and continue their stroll. This scene is incredibly significant because it fits within multiple of Dennis’s rules. Firstly, Spongebob and Patrick are participating in social activities as a couple. This brief stroll was the introduction to a montage of activities that showcased the two raising the clam as a couple, highlighting the “fun part” of parenting. These activities range from riding a bike through the park to pushing the clam on a swing and spinning in circles together. The montage defines their relationship in the sense that they are comfortable with each other as partners, and actively enjoying the time that they spend together as a couple. Secondly, the other fish couple serves an important role in emphasizing Spongebob and Patrick’s relationship: they actively create contrast in not only their staging but in heterosexual normality versus same-sex pairing. By countering the two couples, resulting in opposite positions within the shot, the animators use contrast in duality. The visual opposites relay the deeper meaning to the audience, creating the anomalous effect that casts Spongebob and Patrick in their strange light. Ending the brief scene with the couple’s acceptance also follows in Dennis’s parameter of “being accepted as a couple by others”. Despite their brief hesitation, the couple accepts their odd pairing as something that is better left un-judged, and unquestioned. Even more so, as the episode progresses, Spongebob and Patrick’s relationship becomes more prominently paired and demonstrative of homoromantic attraction. However, in a future episode, there is an audio clip that currently circulates the social media, and the pairing focuses on Spongebob and Squidward.

In the episode “20,000 Patties Under the Sea”, one scene fits within the coding determined by Dennis, while many viewers unknowingly detect this coding through reinventing the audio. This final scene analysis is brief, yet currently one of the most recognizable based on

its audio alone. However, the scene itself provides deep insight. When money-hungry Mr. Krabs wants to make the Krusty Krab mobile, Spongebob and Patrick embark on a journey in a small red submarine to sell as much as possible. When Spongebob says farewell from within the submarine, the dialogue is as follows:

SPONGEBOB: “Bye, Squidward. Bye, Mr. Krabs... Bye, Squidward”

PATRICK: “You said bye Squidward twice.”

SPONGEBOB: “I like Squidward.”

Spongebob’s second “Bye Squidward” is followed by a little wave highlighted by trill notes that are on beat with his fingers. When he states “I like Squidward”, a blank smile spreads across his face as his pupils dilate and he steers the submarine. Patrick appears confused, but only slightly. This scene falls under Dennis’s parameter of “overtly expressing desire through flirting and sexual talk” (132). The way that Spongebob waves and the implications behind the phrase “I like Squidward” serves as a basis for this flirtatious coding and same-sex attraction. His voice also fluctuates in an undeniably playful tone. Many viewers appear to agree, as this audio circulates the popular social media platform, Tik Tok. It is often used to showcase attraction or desire for another person. For example, one user with the tag @theyloveeeky uses the audio paired with the caption “me saying bye to the quiet and shy one in the group” as she waves flirtatiously, much like Spongebob. She is using the sound and mimicking the scene to demonstrate her attraction to another person. Therefore, this scene is transferable and relevant for many viewers and creators and demonstrates desire in such a prominent way that it can be used for specific individuals and their interpretations. When applicable to Spongebob, it signifies his desire for Squidward and relates to his homoromantic asexual identity. On the other hand, when used by creators, it signifies desire however they decide to portray it. In turn, this highlights the fluidity of

Spongebob in not only his gender, but his ability to allow multiple people to express themselves and their own identities, and returns the discussion to his impact and relatability. This time, it is centered around relationships.

*Spongebob Squarepants* creates complex discussions centered around gender, sexuality, and relationships through its animal representation of the asexual and intersex sea sponge, and themes throughout scene analysis that remind viewers of his multi-dimensional, homoromantic asexual identity. Carter focuses on the dialogue between characters from multiple episodes that attribute to gender roles and same-sex relationships, and Dennis argues that “Spongebob and Patrick have a homoerotic pairing” (136), yet the two completely neglect his asexual identity and his species. As best described by Jack Halberstam, in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*: “Most animated films for children are antihumanist, antinormative, multigendered, and full of wild forms of sociality” (181). While these scholars have identified and discussed the antinormative, the multigendered, and even the different forms of sociality, the antihumanist aspect goes seemingly unnoticed. While analyzing Spongebob Squarepants as a character, they fail to recognize that he is an animal, which aids to both his identity and gender expression. While the show does reveal and demonstrate his same-sex, or homoromantic desire, it is the sea sponge that adds his asexual identity and relates to his fluid gender expression. Without this background, it becomes harder for the mainly implicit character to harbor his cultural significance and serve as representation for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Spongebob Squarepants’s sexual identity reveals that there is no black and white answer when it comes to sexual orientation, and what this can mean for queer youth. In the article titled “Improving the Mental Health Outcomes of LGBTQIA+ Youth and Young Adults: A Longitudinal Study”, from the *Journal of Social Service Research*, it reads, “An important step

against “universal sameness” is to ask youth and young adults about their gender identity and sexual orientation, and then explore the unique stressors they experience and the impact of those experiences” (Painter, Scannapieco, Blau, Andre, Kohn). This article urges readers to move past assumptions, and understand the complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity. Although he is simply a character, *Spongebob Squarepants* was previously analyzed based solely on implication, rather than factors such as his animality, which contribute to who he is. In hopes that this discussion reveals how truly individualized and special sexuality and gender expression can be, it can be continued by analyzing characters who move past implication in ways even bolder than *Spongebob Squarepants*. For example, the children's cartoon *Steven Universe*, which premiered May 21, 2013, and quickly became a topic for LGBTQIA+ youth in animation through its openly queer characters and a wedding that showcased two womens’ unity. Even the characters who were shown alongside *Spongebob*, *Korra* and the actor Michael D. Cohen, signify a change in children’s programming. As television series are becoming more inclusive of queer youth, discussions should track how this affects mental health, cultural sensitivity, and future representations for other sexual orientations and gender identities. While the series *Spongebob Squarepants* may be used to begin these discussions, they certainly are not finished.

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