A Mixed Methods Investigation of Social Media Use and Perceptions of Online Toxicity Among LGBTQ+ Young Adults

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INTRODUCTION

- As social media usage continues to increase in popularity, so do instances of cyberbullying (Kennedy, 2019; Chen et al., 2022).

- Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ experience disproportionately high levels of cyberbullying and online toxicity compared to individuals who do not identify as a gender or sexual minority (Vaillancourt et al., 2021; Morales-Arjona, 2022).

- LGBTQ+ youth and adults face increased risk for mental health concerns, including suicidality (Ormiston & Williams, 2021; Ploderl & Tremblay, 2015).

- **Research that seeks to identify and mitigate online toxicity toward LGBTQ+ individuals is thus timely, critical, and potentially lifesaving.**

CURRENT STUDY

- **The aim of this study is to gain insight into platform-based differences and more nuanced aspects of online toxicity targeting LGBTQ+ social media users.**

- The study presents mixed methods findings from a sample of LGBTQ+ young adults who use social media.

- These findings incorporate quantitative self-report survey data with qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses.

METHOD

- **Participants:** Young adults in the U.S. between the ages of 18-25 ($N = 400$; age: $M = 22.42$, $SD = 1.97$) who self-identified as LGBTQ+

Ethnicity	
Latinx/Hispanic	67 (16.8%)
Non-Latinx/non-Hispanic	331 (82.8%)

Race	
White or European Americ	249 (62.3%)
Black or African American	54 (13.5%)
Hispanic or Latinx	45 (11.3%)
American Indian or Alaska	4 (1.0%)
Asian or Asian American	27 (6.8%)
Multiracial	21 (5.3%)

Gender Identity	
Cisgender woman	215 (53.8%)
Cisgender man	88 (22.0%)
Transgender woman	18 (4.5%)
Transgender man	27 (6.8%)
Non-binary	68 (17.0%)
Prefer not to say	1 (0.3%)
Other	10 (2.5%)

Sexual Orientation	
Lesbian/Gay	88 (22.0%)
Bisexual	236 (59.0%)
Questioning	20 (5.0%)
Heterosexual	14 (3.5%)
Asexual	40 (10.0%)
Prefer not to say	1 (0.3%)
Other	44 (11.0%)

- **Measures:** Participants completed an ad-hoc online survey through Prolific that included Likert-type and open response items assessing:
  - their social media use
  - perceptions of general toxicity on different platforms
  - perceptions of toxicity directed toward LGBTQ+ individuals on different platforms
  - beliefs about measures to reduce such online toxicity on social media

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

- YouTube was the platform most regularly-used within the sample (86.3% of respondents), followed by Instagram (73.5% of respondents), TikTok (66.3% of respondents), Twitter (64.3% of respondents), and Reddit (61.8% of respondents).

- Among regular users of the respective platforms, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and Facebook were perceived as containing the highest levels of general toxicity.

- Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit were rated as containing the the highest levels of toxicity directed specifically at LGBTQ+ individuals.
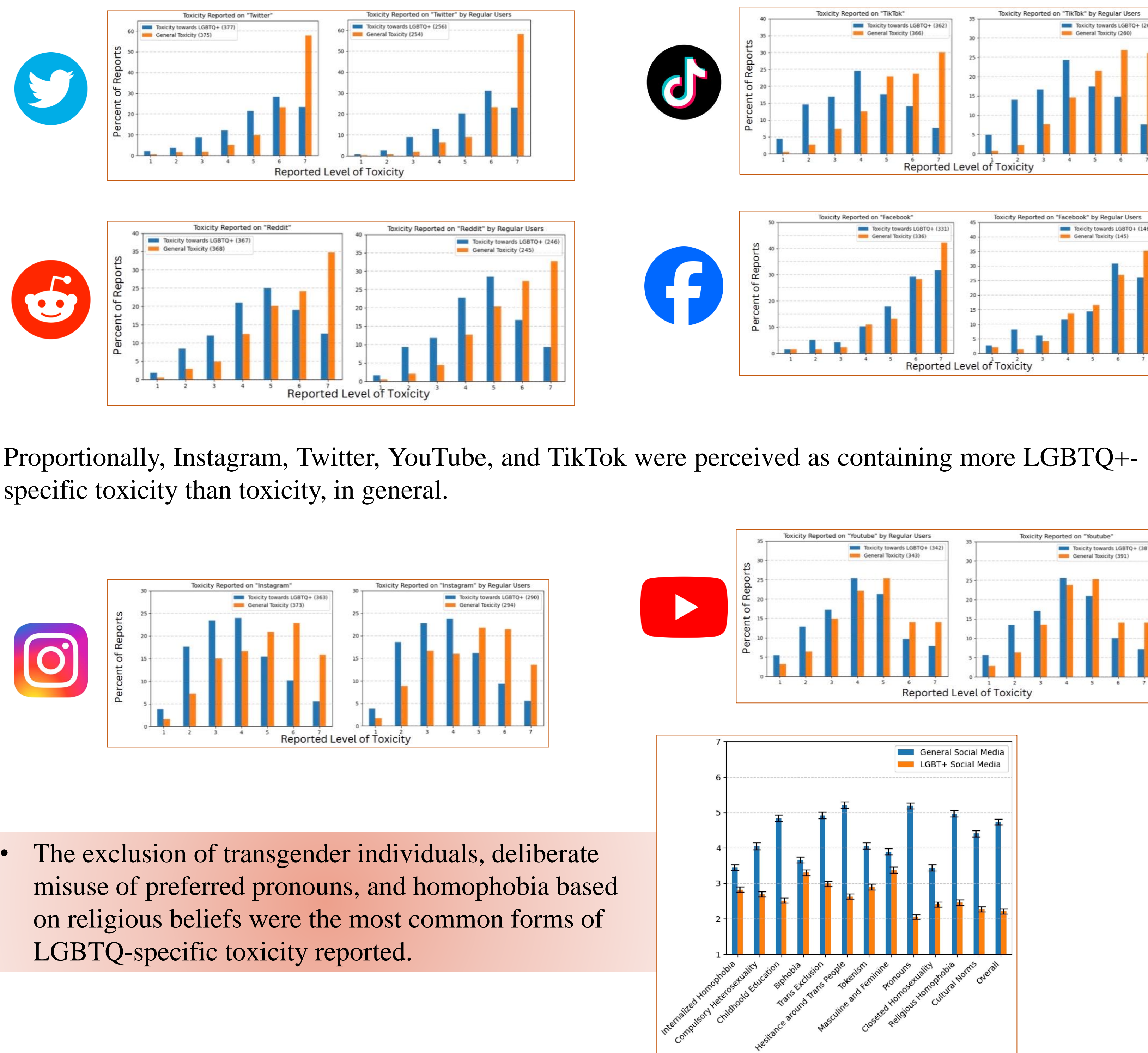
- Proportionally, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok were perceived as containing more LGBTQ+-specific toxicity than toxicity, in general.

- The exclusion of transgender individuals, deliberate misuse of preferred pronouns, and homophobia based on religious beliefs were the most common forms of LGBTQ-specific toxicity reported.

General Social Media Use

Perceptions of General/LGBTQ+ Specific Toxicity

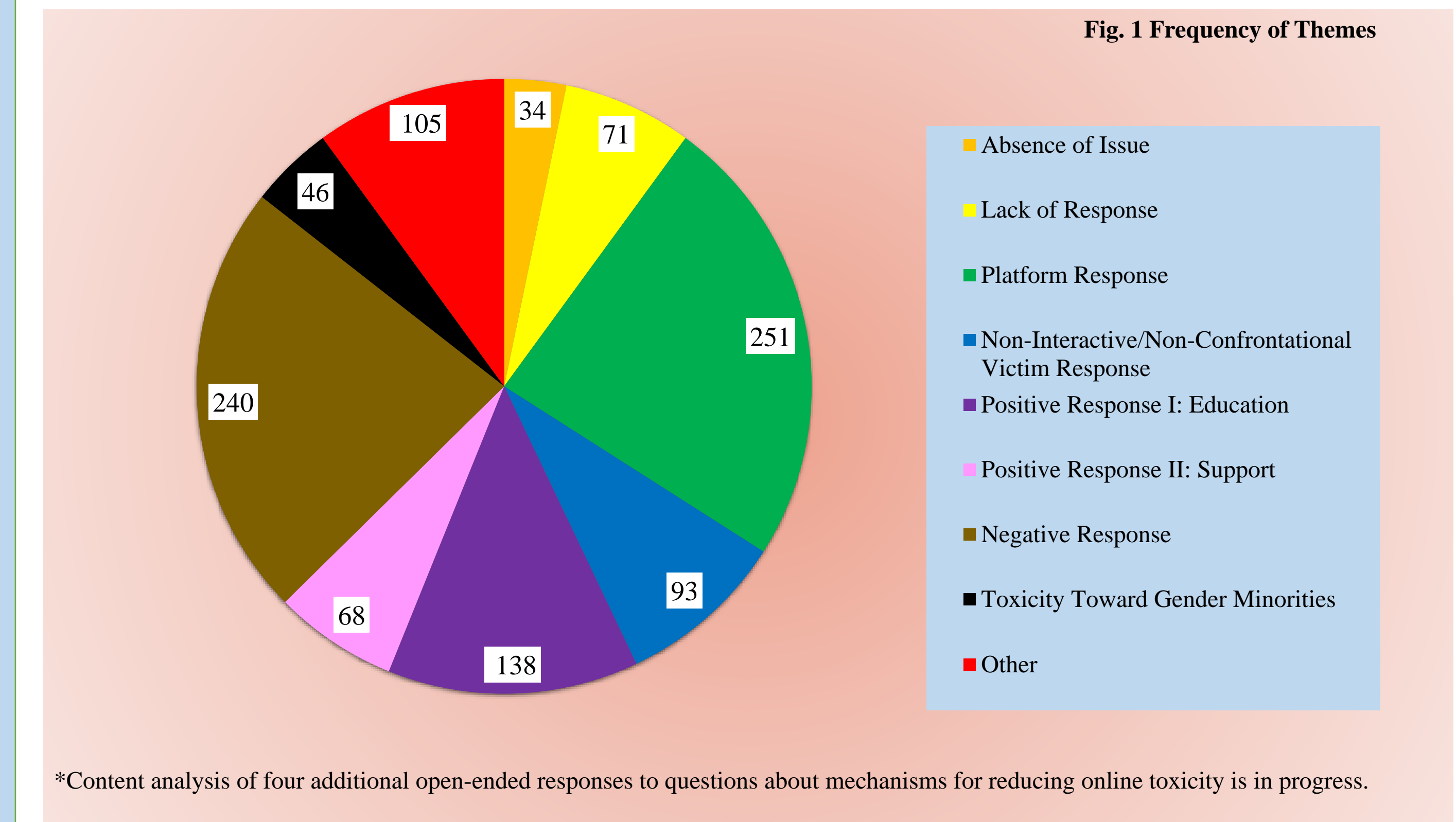Toxicity Reduction Beliefs

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

How have you seen online toxicity towards the LGBTQ+ community within LGBTQ+ spaces dealt with?

- A total of $n = 160$ participants provided open-ended responses to this question

- 5 coders reviewed a subset of responses to develop an initial list of themes

- Each response was then independently coded by 2 research team members, with discrepancies resolved by a 3rd team member

- **Identified Themes:**
  - Absence of Issue
  - Complete Lack of Response (Toxicity occurs but is not handled at all.)
  - Platform Response (e.g., users are reported and banned; posts are deleted by moderators; rules are created/enforced and communicated by moderators)
  - Non-Interactive/Non-Confrontational Victim Response (e.g., victim of toxicity deletes message and/or blocks toxic user, but does not interact with others in doing so)
  - Positive Response #1: Education (Victim/bystanders adopt positive approach by seeking to educate toxic users/others.)
  - Positive Response #2: Community Support (Community bands together to support victim; individuals express support for victim)
  - Negative Response #1: Attack Perpetrators (Victim/Bystanders' responses have a negative valence; e.g., "calling out" or canceling/ostracizing toxic user, attacking toxic user, doxing/seeking to impact toxic user's personal life)
  - Toxicity Toward Gender Minorities (Toxicity specifically targeting trans, non-binary, etc. users.)
  - Other (A response that doesn't fit into one of the themes above but could be beneficial to investigate further.)

Fig. 1 Frequency of Themes

Legend:
- Absence of Issue
- Lack of Response
- Platform Response
- Non-Interactive/Non-Confrontational Victim Response
- Positive Response I: Education
- Positive Response II: Support
- Negative Response
- Toxicity Toward Gender Minorities
- Other

*Content analysis of four additional open-ended responses to questions about mechanisms for reducing online toxicity is in progress.

CONCLUSIONS

- **The present study sheds light on the social media experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as well as potential recommendations for improving these experiences for members of these marginalized communities.**

- **Strengths:** Sufficiently large sample ($N = 400$), recruitment of participants from an online survey platform that is more demographically diverse than undergraduate participant pools, and a sample comprised exclusively of individuals who identify as a gender or sexual minority.

- **Limitations:** Overall lack of diversity with respect to nationality (all U.S. participants) and ethnic and racial identity (e.g., 62.3% of the sample identified as White or European American). Further, 75.8% of the sample identified as Cisgender, with only 11.3% of respondents identifying as Transgender and 17% as Nonbinary.