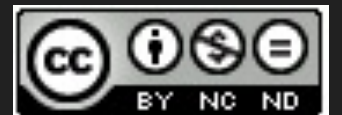# LGBTQ+ Terminology in History Education

Community Research Report
by W. Jake Newsome, Ph.D.

Goal of the Report

Gather input from the LGBTQ+ community to help guide history educators (ranging from teachers and authors to institutions such as museums) in using informed, accurate, inclusive, and dynamic language when teaching about LGBTQ+ history. **This report is meant to highlight key findings and share feedback in respondents' own words.**

Watch the Optional Introductory Video

LINK

(5 minutes)

LESBIAN

GAY

BISEXUAL

TRANSGENDER

QUEER (or QUESTIONING)

INTERSEX

ASEXUAL

2S TWO-SPIRIT

+ Additional sexualities & gender identities

The LGBTQ+ acronym continues to grow and evolve. These are the meanings of the letters you may see most often.

If you encounter letters and you're unsure what they mean, it's okay to ask for clarification.

Transgender (trans): An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, etc.

Cisgender (cis): A term used to describe a person whose gender identity and/or expression aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned at birth.

Non-binary: An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or completely outside these categories.

Language changes.

Remain flexible.

"I think it's important to remember that your experience isn't the experience of others, and certain terminology that offends you might be how someone else chooses to identify."

"Language is allowed to be messy!"

"I'm glad language is always evolving (like terms for race), and I wish that popular media was better at educating the general public."

"The LGBTQ community has reclaimed some words that used to be slurs, like 'queer.' There's something powerful in taking back a word so that it can no longer be used as a weapon against you. **But no matter how normalized these reclaimed words may become, it's important to understand that some LGBTQ people will never identify with them. That's okay. That's valid."**

Most straight respondents reported that hesitancy around terminology has stopped them from engaging in a conversation before.

"I wish there was a black and white answer. I never want to offend anyone, and some people have different opinions on words, so I am always scared to mess up."

"As someone who wants to be an ally, I worry often that I will make a mistake with a term."

"I hope as a straight person I am able to educate myself to make sure the language I use continues to stay inclusive."

Most straight respondents reported that hesitancy around terminology has stopped them from engaging in a conversation before.

LGBTQ+ Respondents' Thoughts on Straight Hesitancy

"I'm not offended if someone uses an outdated term if I can tell they're trying. Look, we're all learning. We have to create space for educating and learning."

"The key is intent and mutual respect. We as the LGBT community should have patience with people who are trying to learn. And to the rest of society: If a LGBT person corrects your language, it's okay. They're not saying you're a bad person. Don't take it personal and don't be afraid to mess up."

CONTEXT MATTERS

Scholars use particular language when writing for each other in academic settings. The use of terminology, including problematic terminology, may be acceptable – indeed, necessary – in that context.

Educators often need to use different terms (and even approaches) when speaking with non-specialists and audiences composed of people from diverse backgrounds with varying levels of baseline knowledge or experience on a topic.

What may be standard practice in scholarship probably won't be effective in museum exhibits, books for the general public, or the classroom (unless the goal is to undertake a nuanced deep-dive).
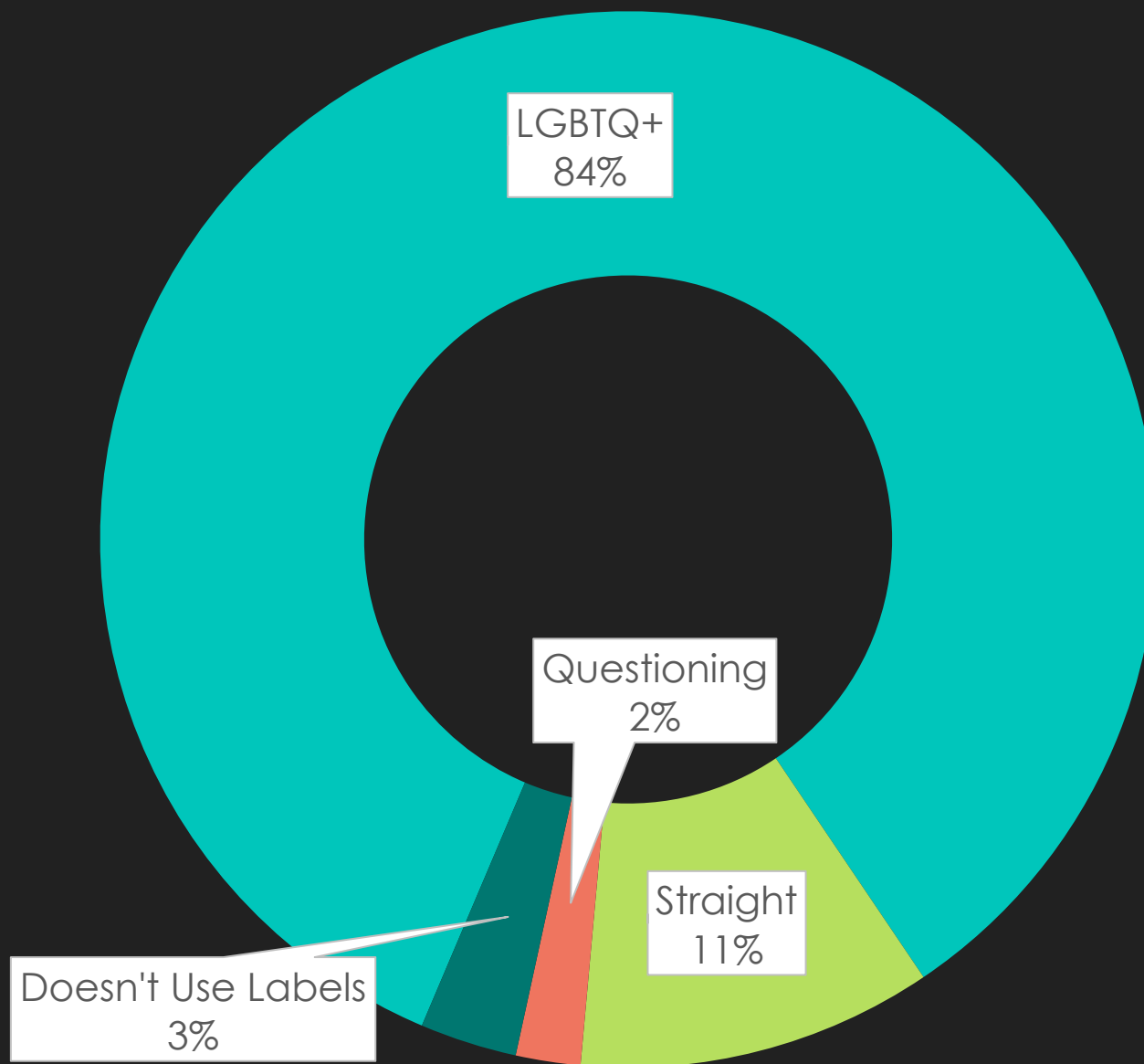
Who Were the Survey Respondents?
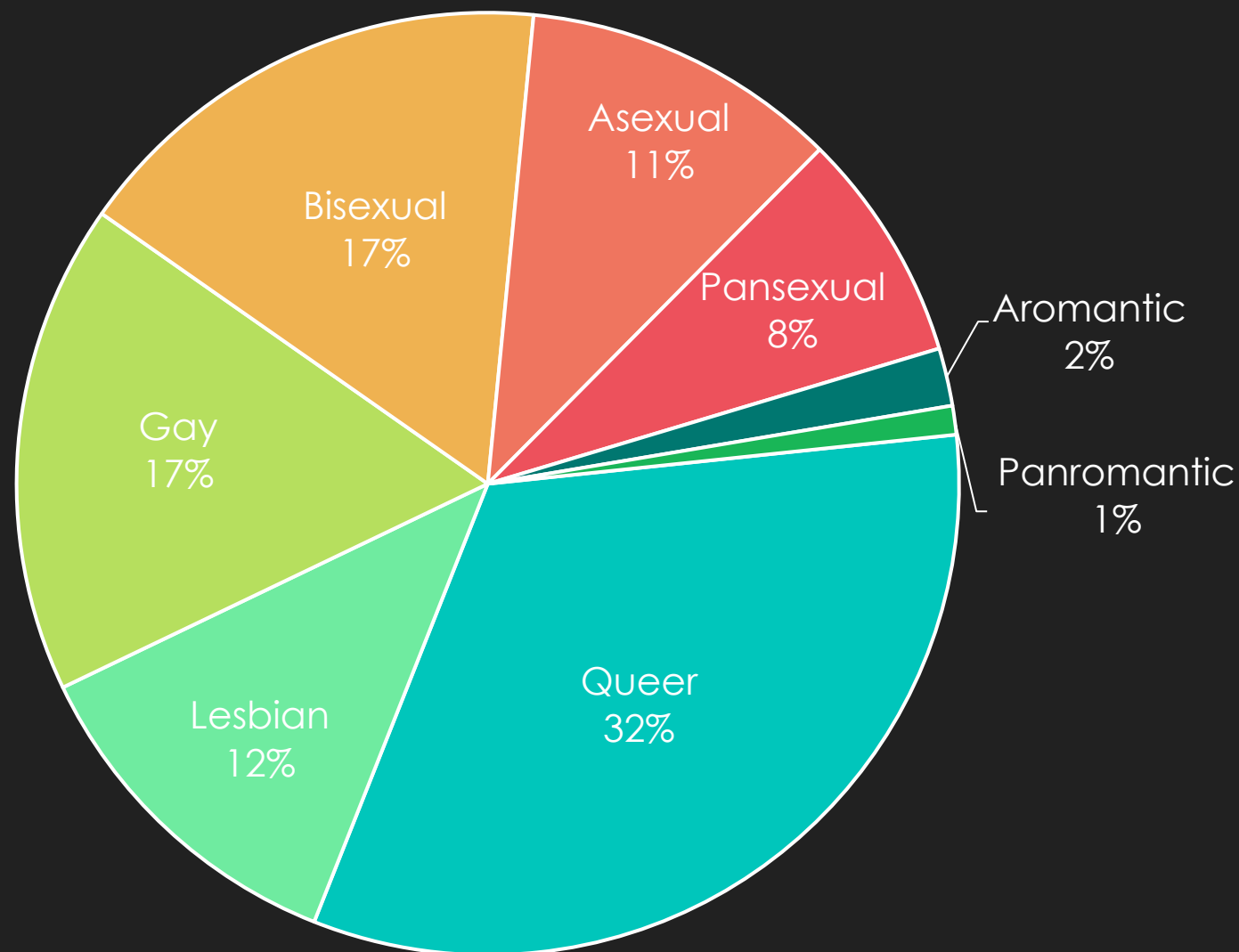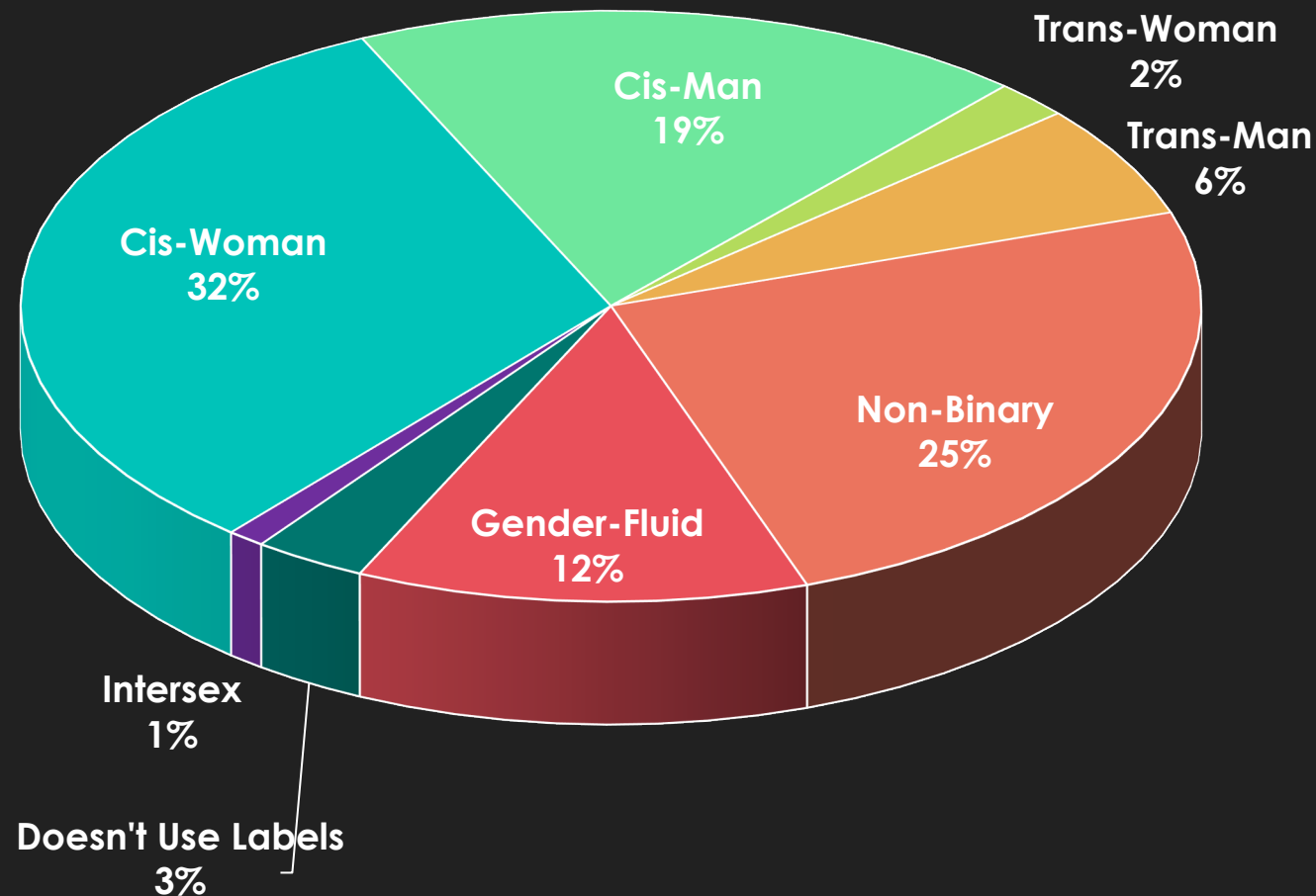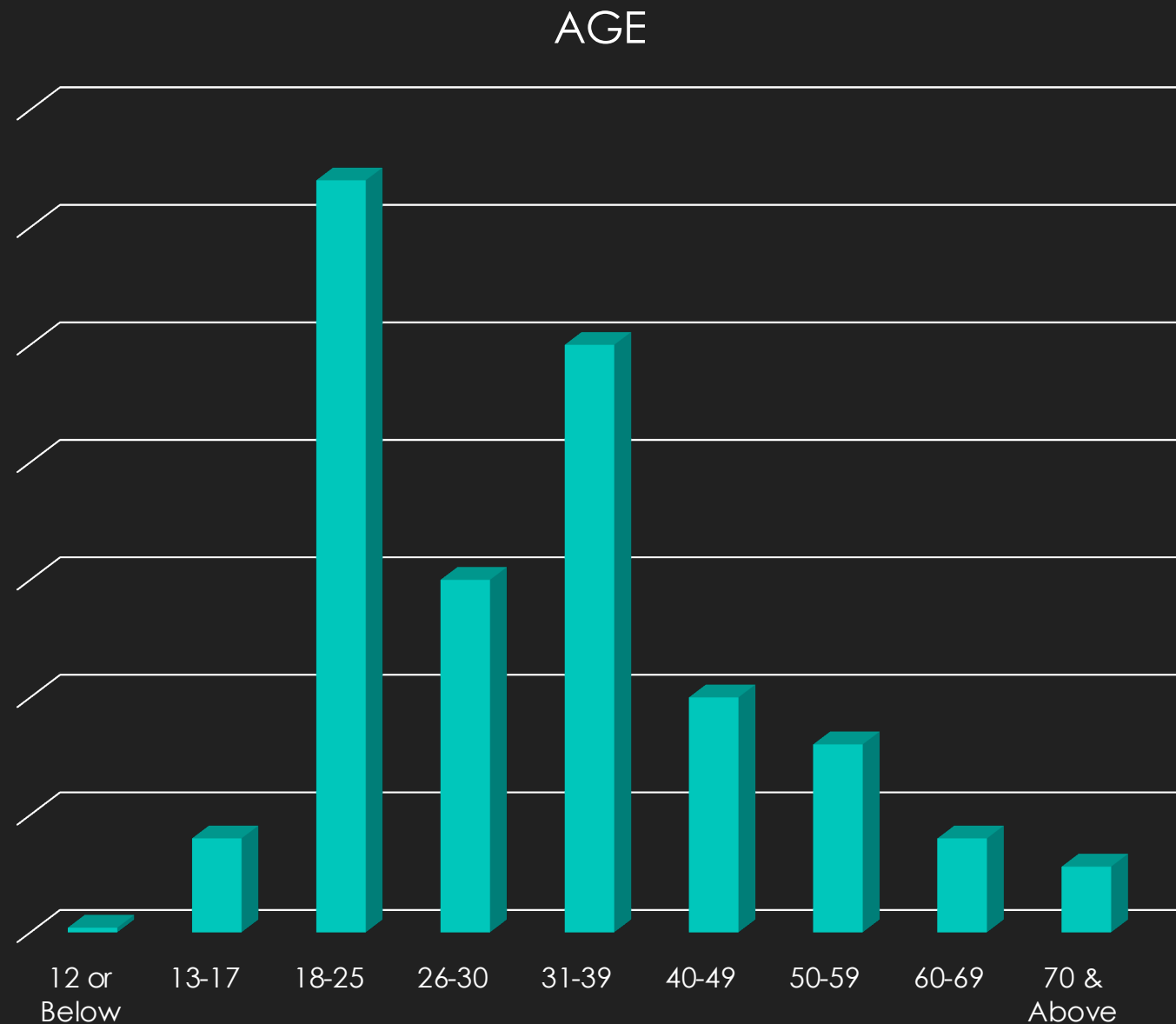
The Acronym vs. Queer

Respondents Preferred:

QUEER	36%
LGBTQ+	23%
LGBTQ	19%
LGBTQIA+	11%
LGBT	2%
OTHER	6%
INTERCHANGEABLE	3%

The majority (55%) preferred some variation of the acronym.
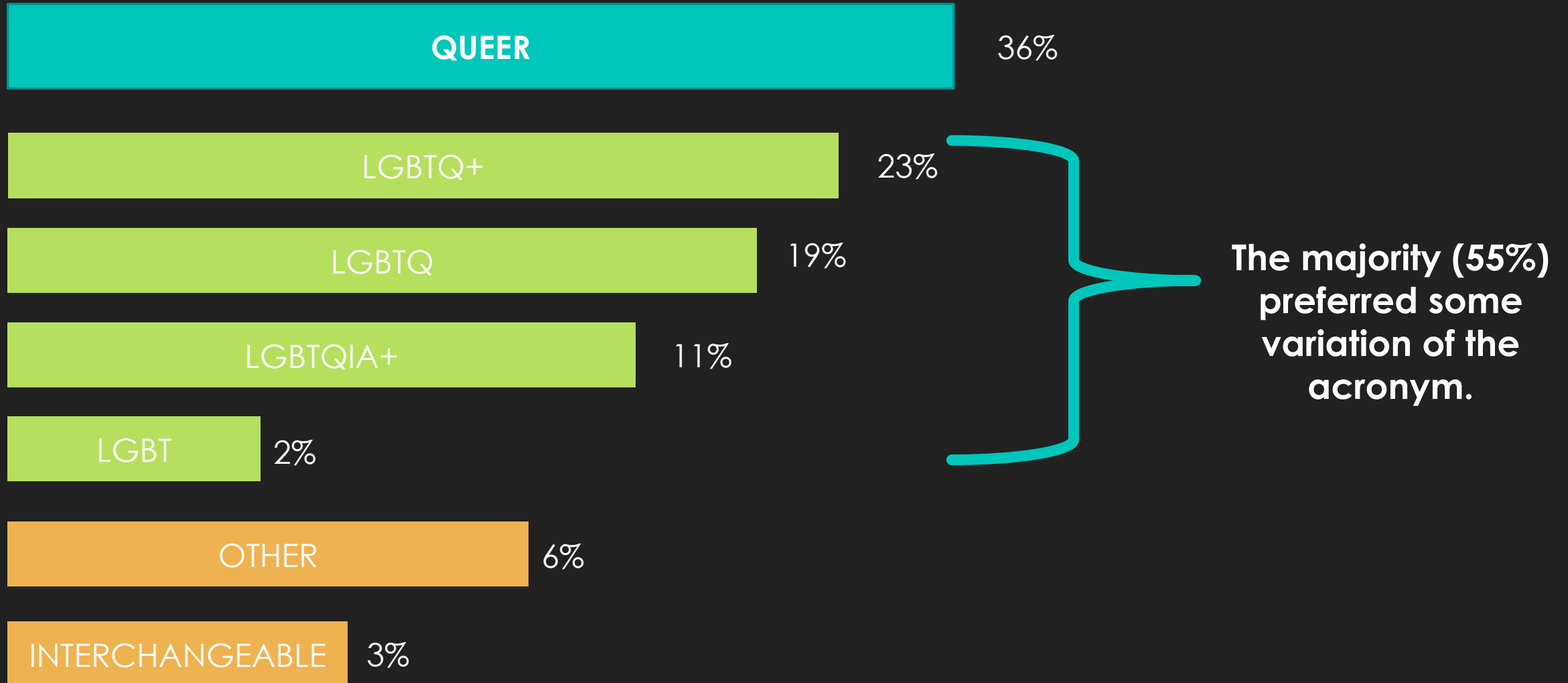
The Acronym vs. Queer

ACRONYM

- "I like that the acronym illustrates the diversity of identities."

- "I feel like LGBT is most often used by straight people and institutions like the news. That's probably because LGBT is more neutral. It's descriptive."

- "Queer has baggage. Using LGBTQ is much safer."

QUEER

- "I hate that g*ddamn acronym. Pretending a list is ever gonna be inclusive is nonsense."

- "The acronym prioritizes some identities and lumps everyone else into a plus sign. How degrading!"

- "Queer is more inclusive. It is an umbrella term that encompasses all the LGBTs and everything that's hidden by the plus sign."

Have you ever encountered problematic or offensive terminology in an exhibit or history book?

69% said **YES**

27% said **NO**

4% said **NOT SURE**

Of those that said NO,
8% noted "I knew those terms are historical."

12% noted they don't normally see any mention of LGBTQ+ people at all.

Most Encountered Problematic Terms:
(in order of frequency of respondents' mentions)

- Homosexual
- Faggot
- Mislabeling trans identities
- Dyke
- Using "gay" or "gay & lesbian" for the entire LGBTQ+ community
- Tranny
- "Preference" or "lifestyle"
- Transgendered
- Hermaphrodite
- Conflating "gender" and "sexuality"

Thoughts on "Queer"

Age 49 & Below

Age 50 & Above

Age 49 & Below	Response	Age 50 & Above
15%	I don't prefer it, but it's not offensive.	30%
57%	I like it and use it myself.	26%
20%	It's only ok for LGBTQ+ people to use.	21%
2%	Don't use it; it's offensive.	20%
6%	I don't know when it's okay to use.	3%

Thoughts on "queer"

"I wouldn't call myself an expert, but queer has a political connotation that LGBTQ doesn't. "

"An aspect of what appeals to me about queer is that it is partly undefinable. It's fluid. It can encompass all LGBTQ labels or defy labels."

"When I hear someone use "queer," I think they are either an academic or they are on the Left. Probably both."

"The problem around the word queer is a generational thing. Queer has historically been used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people. Many older community members haven't been part of the movement to reclaim its usage. Young people who use queer should understand it's okay for them to use it to describe themselves, but also respect that others in the community don't want to use it."

Thoughts on "Homosexual"

Age 49 & Below

Age 50 & Above

40%	I don't prefer it, but it's not offensive.	41%
23%	I'm not offended but I don't use it because I know it can be problematic for others.	23%
13%	It's only ok for LGBTQ+ people to use.	6%
13%	I like it and use it myself.	15%
7%	Don't use it; it's offensive.	10%
4%	I don't know when it's okay to use.	5%

Thoughts on "homosexual"

"I know it used to be positive (didn't a gay guy invent the word?) but today 'homosexual' makes my skin crawl because it's been used as a tool by religion and society to hurt gay men for decades."

"Homosexual feels scientific and sterile, like it's a clinical diagnosis…and you know what? "Homosexuality" WAS used as a diagnosis for a long time! Excuse me, I'm not sick!

"Wait, homosexual is problematic? I thought it was neutral?"

"If I see an author or museum use "homosexual," it automatically makes me skeptical of what they are saying."

"I've always identified as homosexual, and it should not be treated as a bad word."

Trans* Terminology

While there have been recent strides in understanding and speaking about sexual identities and orientations, there is still a long way to go in understanding issues and terminology related to gender identities and expressions.

Educators, authors, and museums must take the time to educate themselves about these terms and the realities they represent.

- Gender and sexuality are related but **not interchangeable.** Cisgender and transgender are gender identities, not sexual orientations.

- **Don't Mislabel:** just as there are many sexual identities, there are many gender identities. Learning the differences will equip educators so that they don't mislabel someone.

- **Don't Deadname**, or call a transgender person by their birth name (or pronouns) when they have changed their name (or pronouns) as part of their gender transition.

- **Pronouns matter.** Learn about them and use them correctly.

When is it Okay?

Some thoughts from respondents on navigating terminology

Intention matters.

"It can be a very complex issue, but I think the most important thing to look at is intent."

"Terminology is very important, however, I think it can be rude to expect everyone (especially people outside the community) to be well educated on terminology. Their effort and intention need to be taken into consideration."

"Be willing to apologize and change when failures happen. And believe me, they will."

"As an educator myself, I find it so vital when educating or writing to emphasize the intensely personal nature of labeling. This isn't just about a glossary of terms. It's about PEOPLE."

Who's speaking?

When talking about specific communities – especially marginalized communities – the in group/out group dynamics will always play a role.

"It may not sound fair, but there are words that are only okay for LGBTQ+ people themselves to say. Like, straight people or institutions should not get comfortable with using 'queer.'"

"It sets my teeth on edge if I hear a person say homosexual unless I know that person is queer themself."

"If I saw a museum display or recent book that used "homosexual" throughout, I'd think the person who had written the book or the panel was very dated in their terminology!"

"It depends on audience. In an academic context, using outdated terms may make sense, especially if you're researching different identities. But if you're teaching about the history of the Civil War and want to include LGBTQ+ people, there's no need to use terminology that would alienate current students. It's okay to write for current audiences, too."

"I know that terms like "homosexual" are historic and that queer people used them back in the day. But I don't feel comfortable with institutions like museums using that term (or its derivatives, like homosexuality). Sure, it's fine to use direct quotes and let queer people use those terms themselves. But, institutions in the past (like the medical field, museums, the law, etc.) used their authority to turn "homosexuality" into a problem that needed to be prosecuted, locked away, or "cured." So, I don't think they deserve to use that terminology today. They're the ones who tainted it. Instead, they should learn from the LGBTQ+ community what terms they should use."

Who's Speaking?

LET HISTORICAL SUBJECTS SPEAK

It's okay to use terminology that may be outdated in direct quotes. If you know how a person identified, use that term. Otherwise, use descriptive terminology. Don't mislabel.

INSTITUTION OR AUTHOR VOICE

When authors, educators, or museums speak in their voice, they should use terminology that is nuanced, considerate of changes in vocabulary over time, and reflects the contemporary values of the community(ies) in question.

"It's degrading to reduce a person down to one aspect of their identity. I'm Black. It's fine to call me Black. But don't say 'the Blacks.' Similarly, I'm lesbian. But don't say "the lesbians.""

"Use gay, lesbian, or any other word as an adjective, but come on…as a noun? No. Just no. I can't tell you how many times I've seen magazines or books talk about "the gays," or "the history of gays and lesbians." That needs to stop! We are full, complex, beautiful people. Yes, we are gay or queer or trans. But don't reduce us to a noun."

"I do not find the term homosexuality offensive. It is a decent word to describe a sexuality. But, using homosexual as a noun carries different conations entirely."

"Whenever I hear someone use homosexual or gay as a noun, it sounds like gay people are creatures that they're observing."

Don't reduce people to nouns.

Explain your word choice.

"I have seen historians explain why they are using terminology that might in other contexts be problematic (ex: homosexual, transsexual). I think it's ok when these were the terms people used to articulate their identities in the past, but the author should explain this."

"If authors define their terms and explain why they've chosen them, it helps a lot."

"I think in explaining the past, you have to use the historical terms. But it's the duty of the author/curator to explain WHY such terminology may be problematic today."

"I wish more authors and institutions would just be upfront with their readers. Tell us why you chose to use certain words. Even if I disagree, at least I know you've put thought into it. That builds trust. Otherwise, people can interpret your choices however they want."

How and when should authors or museums use "homosexual"?

74 % — Use it only once to explain its use in the past (plus in any direct quotes), but then don't use it in institution/author voice.

19 % — Use it throughout the book or exhibit in both direct quotes and in author/institution voice; historical accuracy is most important.

4 % No preference / not sure

3 % Never use it; it's offensive

FOR EXAMPLE

How and when should authors or museums use "transvestite"?

Transvestite doesn't mean the same thing today that it originally meant. When the word was coined, it was a broad umbrella term that referred to a range of identities and actions. Today it is very specific. When using it in an educational context today, be sure to clarify how you're using it (and why).

"Being transvestite isn't offensive. What's offensive is being mislabeled. Transgender people and transvestites aren't the same thing."

"If a person identifies as transvestite, then by all means, they should use it for themselves, and authors should refer to them as such. But it's highly problematic to use it for folks who do not identify that way."

FOR EXAMPLE

Listen to your audiences.

"Thank you for doing this. It warms my heart that somebody cares enough to ask these kinds of questions."

"Use the platinum rule: treat people the way THEY want to be treated. Use the terms and labels THEY identify with."

"Thank you for asking the community and getting our input...We should have a say in how our history is told."

"Use the words that people use to describe their lives. Take note of but don't repeatedly use terms that are imposed on groups from non-members."

"It's really important to listen to your audiences. I don't think it's appropriate for educators to use problematic terms just to be "historical." There are so many historical terms we don't use any more, like "the n word." Why do some authors and museums insist on using problematic terms for the LGBTQ community?"

Embrace the teachable moments.

"I feel like cultural institutions like museums have roles to play in setting new levels of normalcy and helping create environments that are inclusive."

"In general, it seems like there aren't enough mainstream outlets that explain why terms are important and/or problematic."

"The more energy, space, and time we use in prefaces, exhibits, and conversation to give context and educate, the better. People who do get offended are understandably so if they've never been exposed to these ideas. Let's give them the opportunity to understand."

"Of course, do your homework. Prepare. Ask for input and be genuinely open to feedback. But don't be paralyzed by the fear of getting it wrong. We all mess up. Just be willing to learn and move forward. We do most of our learning and growing in those messy spots."

"Authors, museums, and teachers shouldn't act like they know everything all the time. It helps students and visitors to understand that we ALL need to grapple with and give thought to these important issues."

Resources on Terminology

Human Rights Campaign
Glossary of Terms

@LGBTQ.Black.Pride
Instagram Account

Gender Identity & Pronouns
4-Minute Video

GLSEN
Pronoun Guide

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