

Representations of the ‚Toxic‘. Usage and Evaluation in Linguistic Community and Media Discourse

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Agenda

- 1) What we mean by 'representations' of the toxic
- 2) What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic'
 - a) First study: Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community
 - b) Second study: The media discourse – a corpus based approach
- 3) What we can learn from the two studies



What we mean by ‘representations’ of the toxic

Socio-pragmatic term of representation as used in Discourse Linguistics (cf. Spieß forth.):

Representations are

- understood as ‘work of representation’: social constructivist approach (cf. Hall 1997)
- non-intentional and non-reflective
- based on a common ground and therefore constructive
- a dynamic process of negotiation of knowledge
- discursive signifying practices integrated in and generating contexts

„But what does representation have to do with 'culture': what is the connection between them? To put it simply, culture is about 'shared meanings'. Now, language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings.“ (Hall 1997: 1)



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What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Observation: People do speak more and more of something as ‘toxic’.

Research Questions:

- (1) Where have the people heard someone using the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)
- (2) How did the people understand the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)
- (3) What do people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’? (*meaning*)
- (4) Which different entities do they label as ‘toxic’? (*production*)
- (5) What associations are connected to the attribute? (*production*)
- (6) How do people evaluate the labeling of something as ‘toxic’? (*evaluation*)

Data Set:

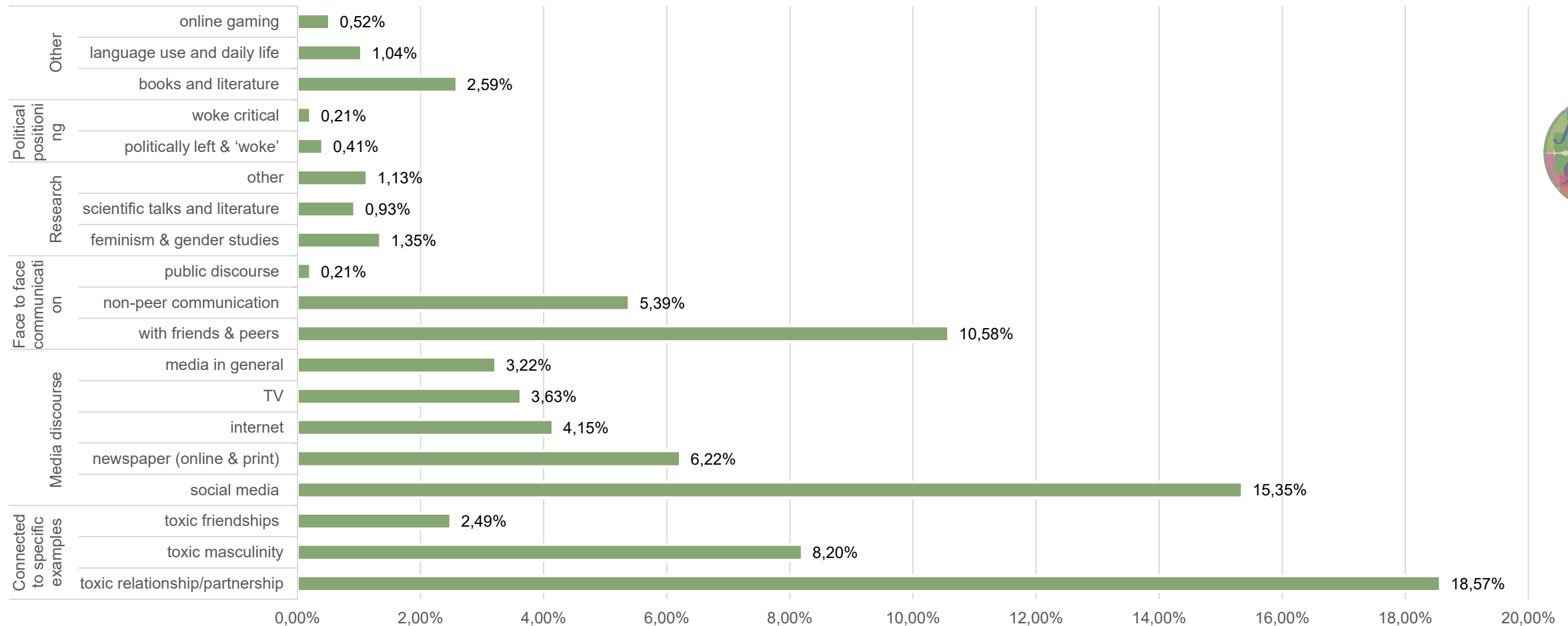
Online-questionnaire with 10 questions, conducted from September 2023 to December 2023

Total participants, n=434



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (1) Where have the people heard someone using the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

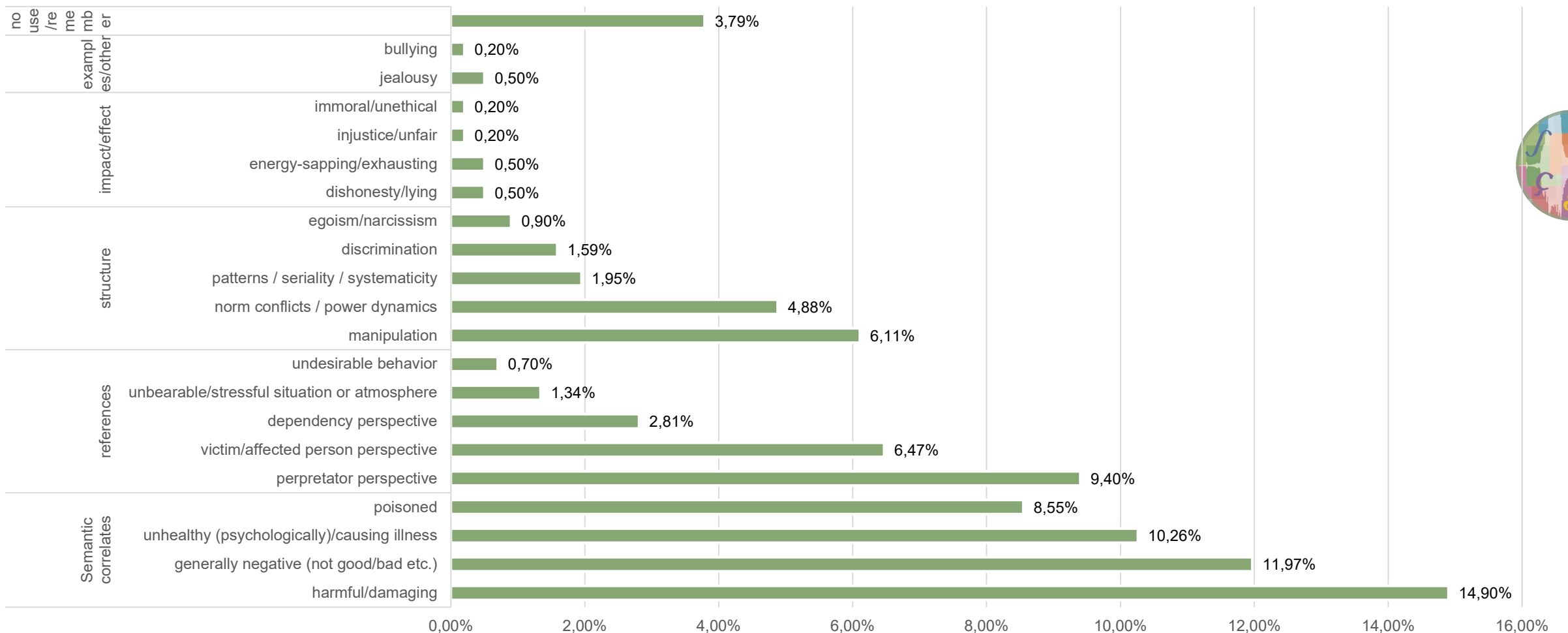
Some examples: (1) Where have the people heard someone using the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)

- 1) “In the media, for example in articles in Süddeutsche or ZEIT, there is often talked of "toxic" relationships or even "toxic" masculinity. Just recently, an article in Süddeutsche (I think) was titled: "And what if I'm toxic myself?" Or something like that”
- 2) “Mainly in the context of "toxic masculinity / relationships". Occurs verbally and in writing; public communication rather than private conversations.”
- 3) “You hear/read it very often in the news, newspapers, etc. Toxic masculinity is mentioned particularly often. I can't think of any specific individual situations in which I've noticed it.



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (2) How did the people understand the label ‘toxic’? (perception)



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

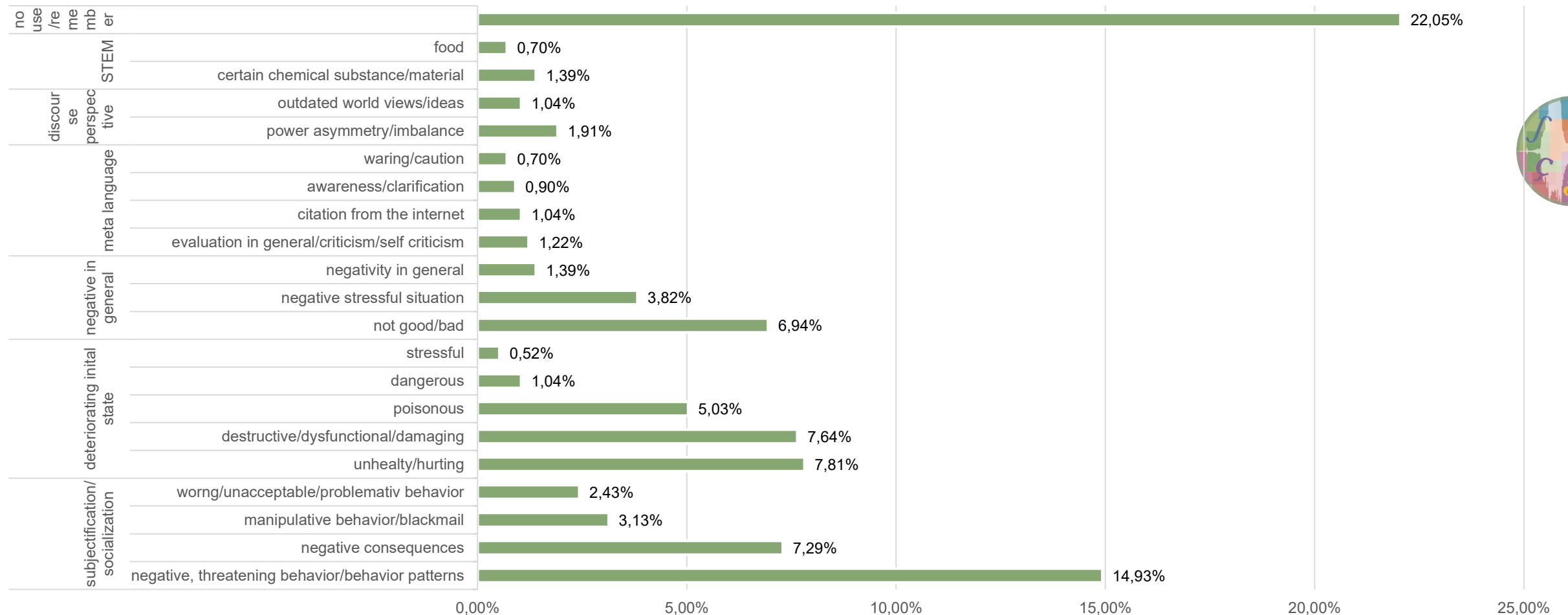
Some examples: (2) How did the people understand the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)

- 1) "Toxic masculinity" refers to **behavior that is ultimately based on conservative and mostly heteronormative, socially constructed ideas of gender relations**: men/people read as masculine are expected, for example, to provide for the family, protect the woman, not show (have?) any feelings, be "strong". This can result, for example, in **men who want to meet these supposed (normative) expectations** of their own behavior, acting possessive, domineering, dominant towards women, or not allowing themselves to be affected by emotions such as sadness, despair or similar. [...]"
- 2) "The situation is unbearable, strong negativity emanates from a person or a group, destructive attitude, poor work organization, no leadership, hurtful remarks, bullying"



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (3) What do people mean by labeling something as 'toxic'?



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

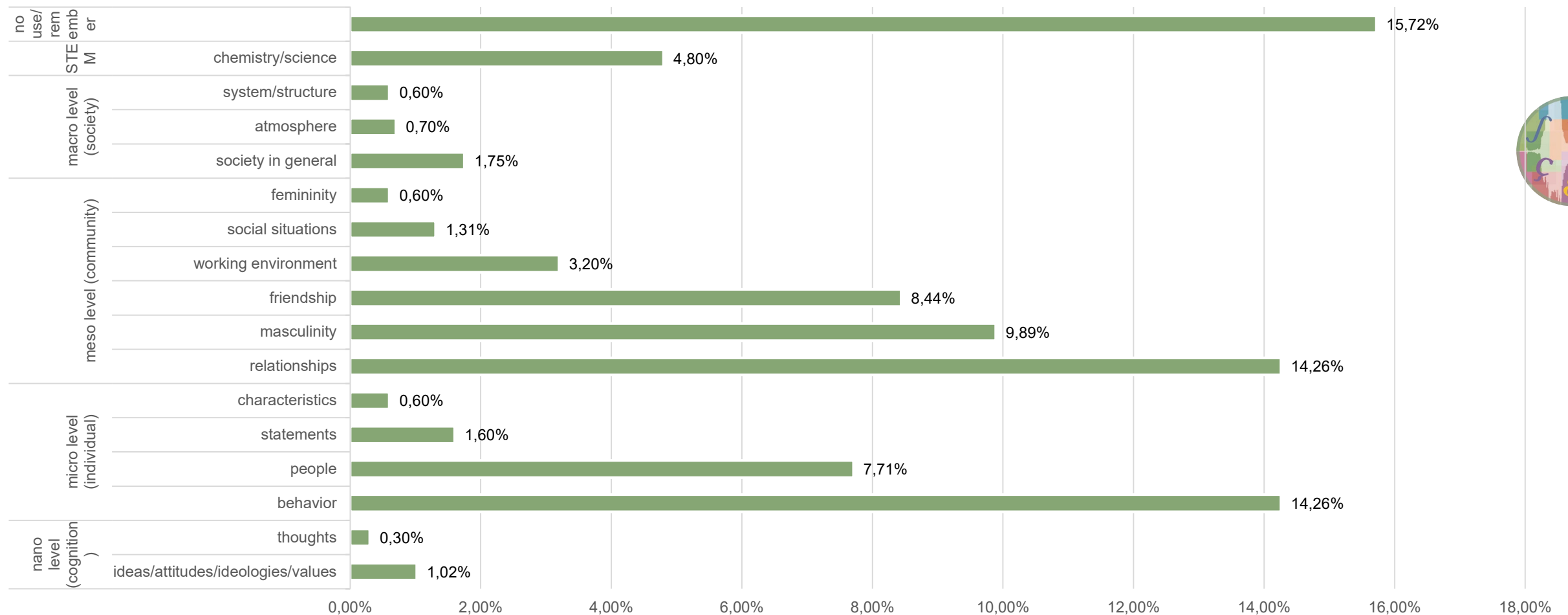
Some examples: (3) What do people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’? (*perception*)

- 1) "because it's a great word :-) as I said, I wanted to express that something is not "healthy", but somehow poisoned. that it's the way it shouldn't be or the way you don't imagine it to be in an ideal state, perhaps"
- 2) "The connotation of the use of 'toxic' in comparison to, for example, 'destructive', 'harmful' would be the reference to a "modern" discourse within which a great sensitivity to power imbalances plays a central role."
- 3) "I wanted to specify the balance of power and make it clear that there is a situation that cannot be fruitful for good relationships. Sometimes to warn people, sometimes to make myself aware of it. However, I only use the term when many things come together and the situation is really extreme."



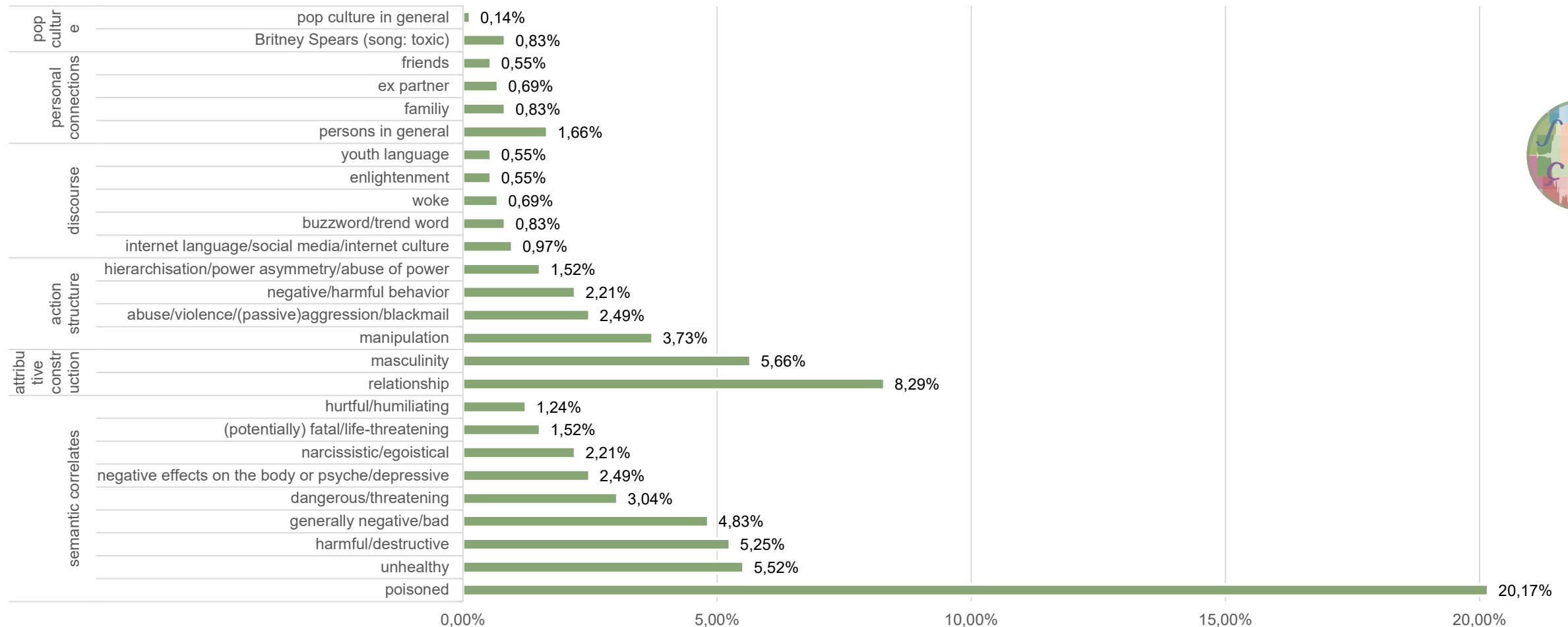
What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (4) Which different entities do they label as ‘toxic’? (*production*)



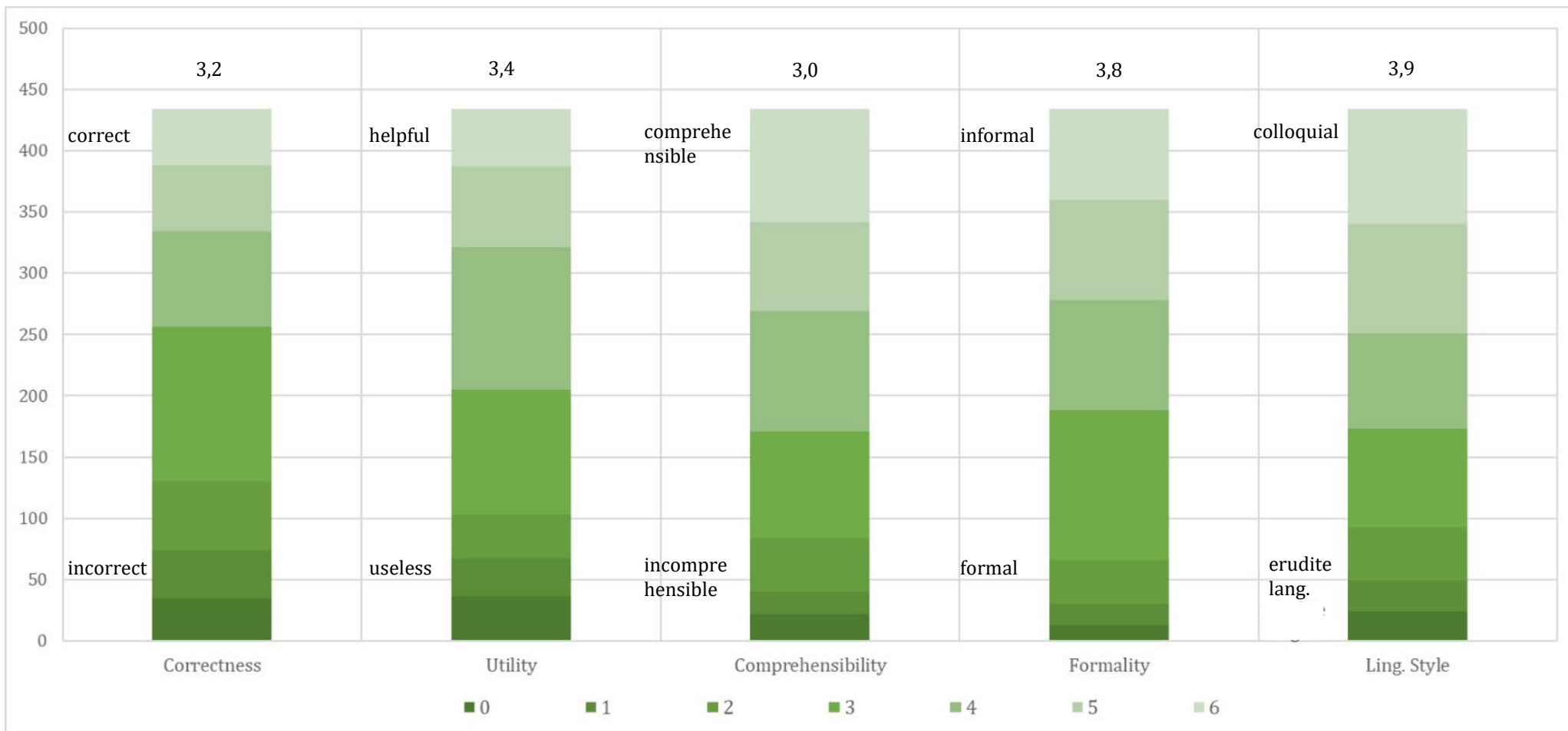
What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (5) What associations are connected to the attribute?



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: (6) How do people evaluate the labeling of something as ‘toxic’? (*evaluation*)



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

A very short summary

- media discourse is rather dominant
- labeling something as toxic describes multifactorial negative circumstances (harmful, damaging, unhealthy and so on)
- two possible perspectives: victim and perpetrator
- it mostly refers to individual entities (persons) or entities of community (friendships, relationships)
- very diverse associations (poisoned, unhealthy, narcissistic, manipulation, abuse, youth, woke)
- evaluation is not (yet) clear (*tendency towards the center*)



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What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 2 – The media discourse – a corpus based approach

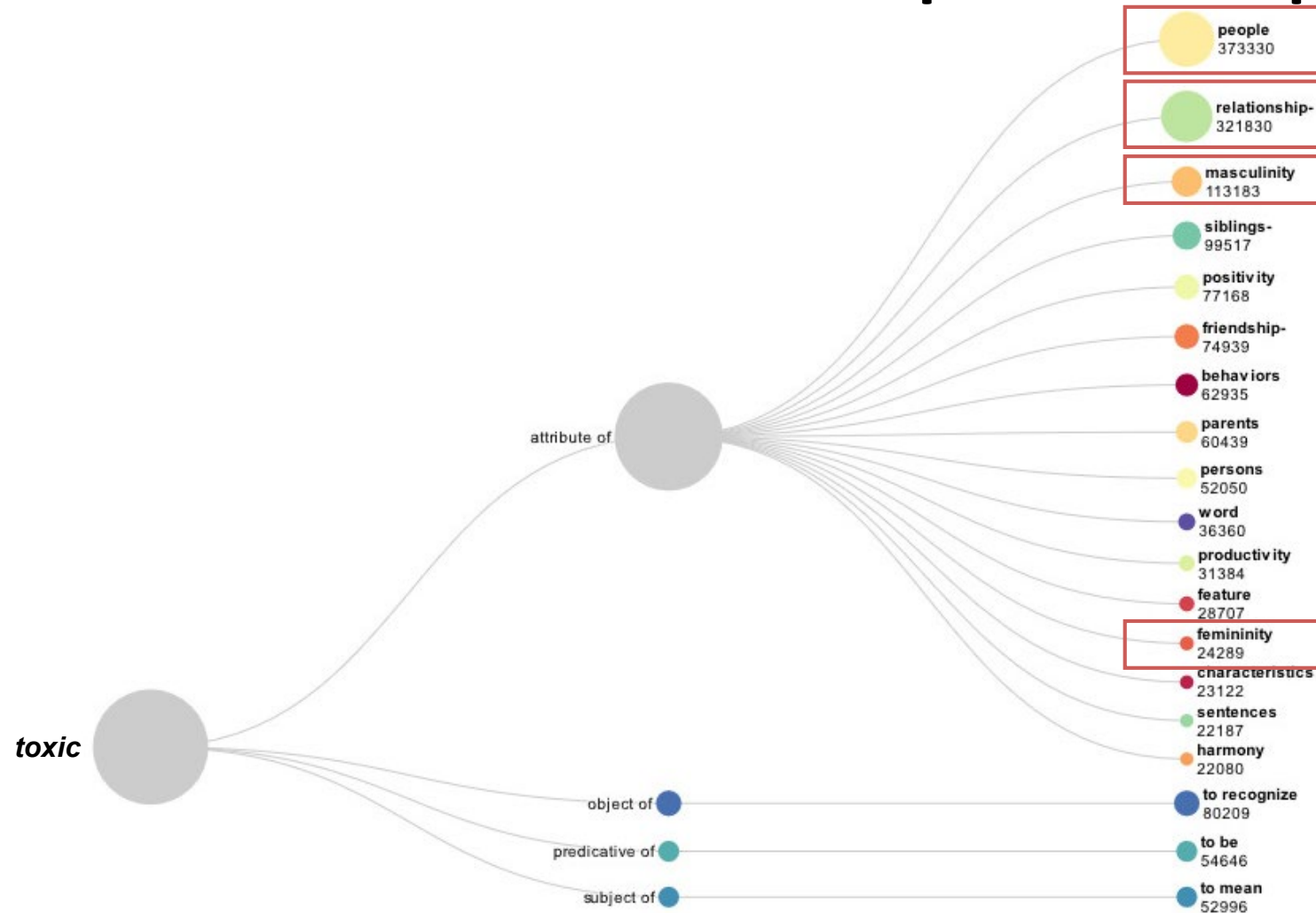
Data

- 100 texts according to thematic selection (content-related thematization of [social] toxicity)
- publicated from 30.09.2022 to 16.06.2023, online
- media (N>2): Brigitte, Business Insider, Glamour, Mein MMO (magazine for multiplayer and online games), Myself - das Magazin für starke Frauen, NZZ, Stern, Stuttgarter Nachrichten, WMN - Das Lifestyle-Magazin
- tokens: 69,081
- word forms with toxic (e.g., toxisch, toxische, toxischer) occur 1014 times in the corpus



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 2 – The media discourse – a corpus based approach

Results

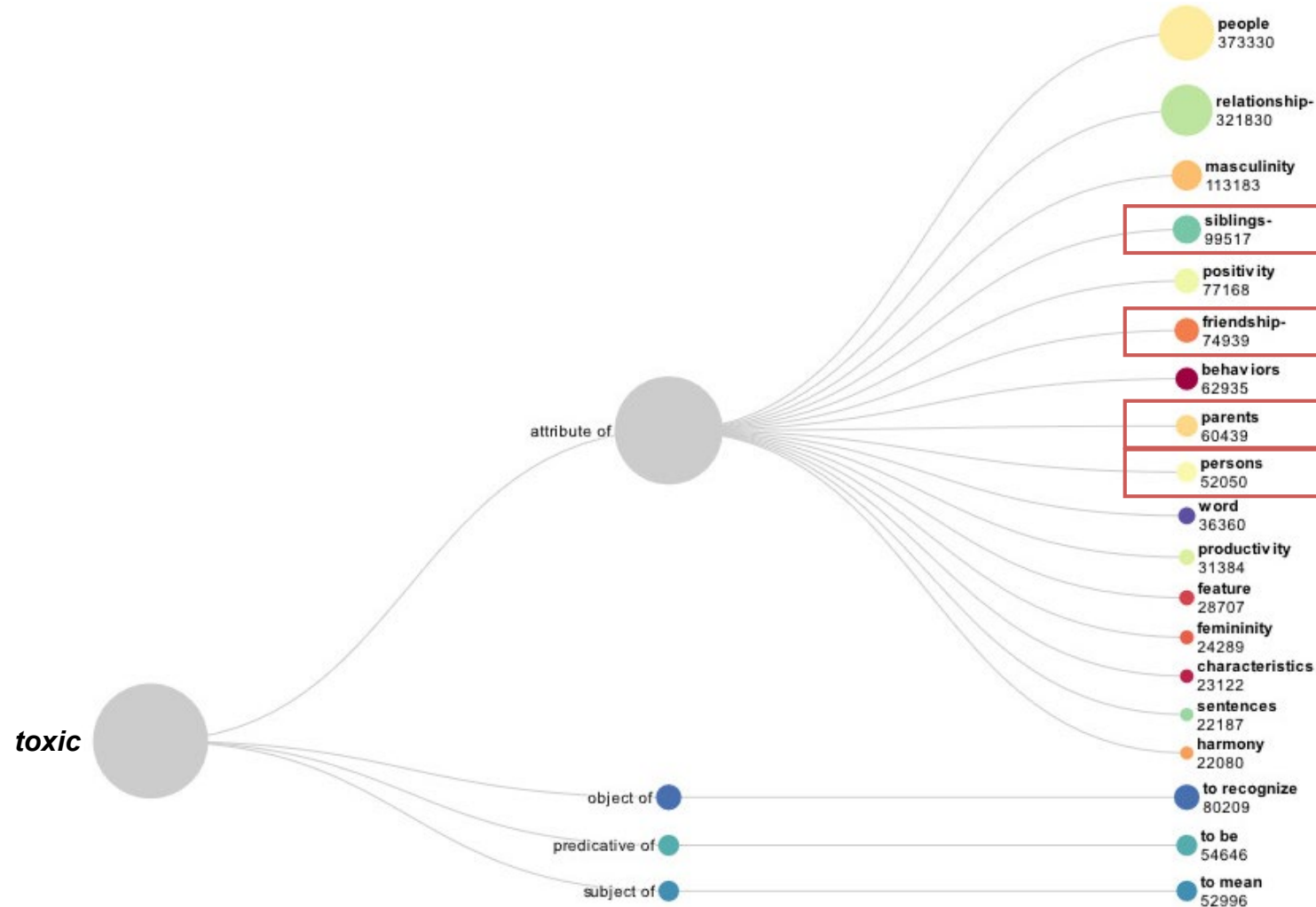


Representations of the 'Toxic' – Toke Hoffmeister & Lars Sörries-Vorberger



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 2 – The media discourse – a corpus based approach

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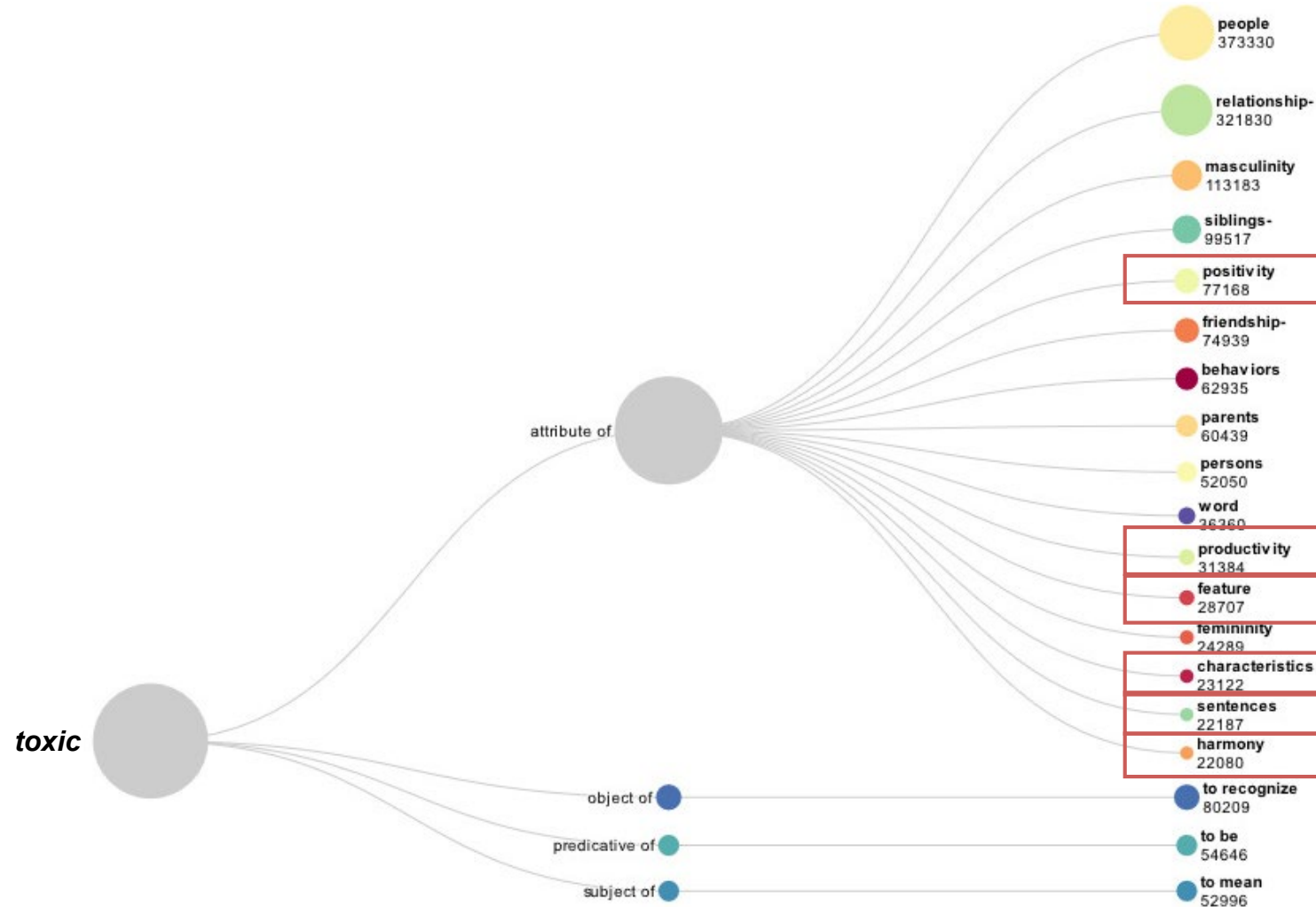


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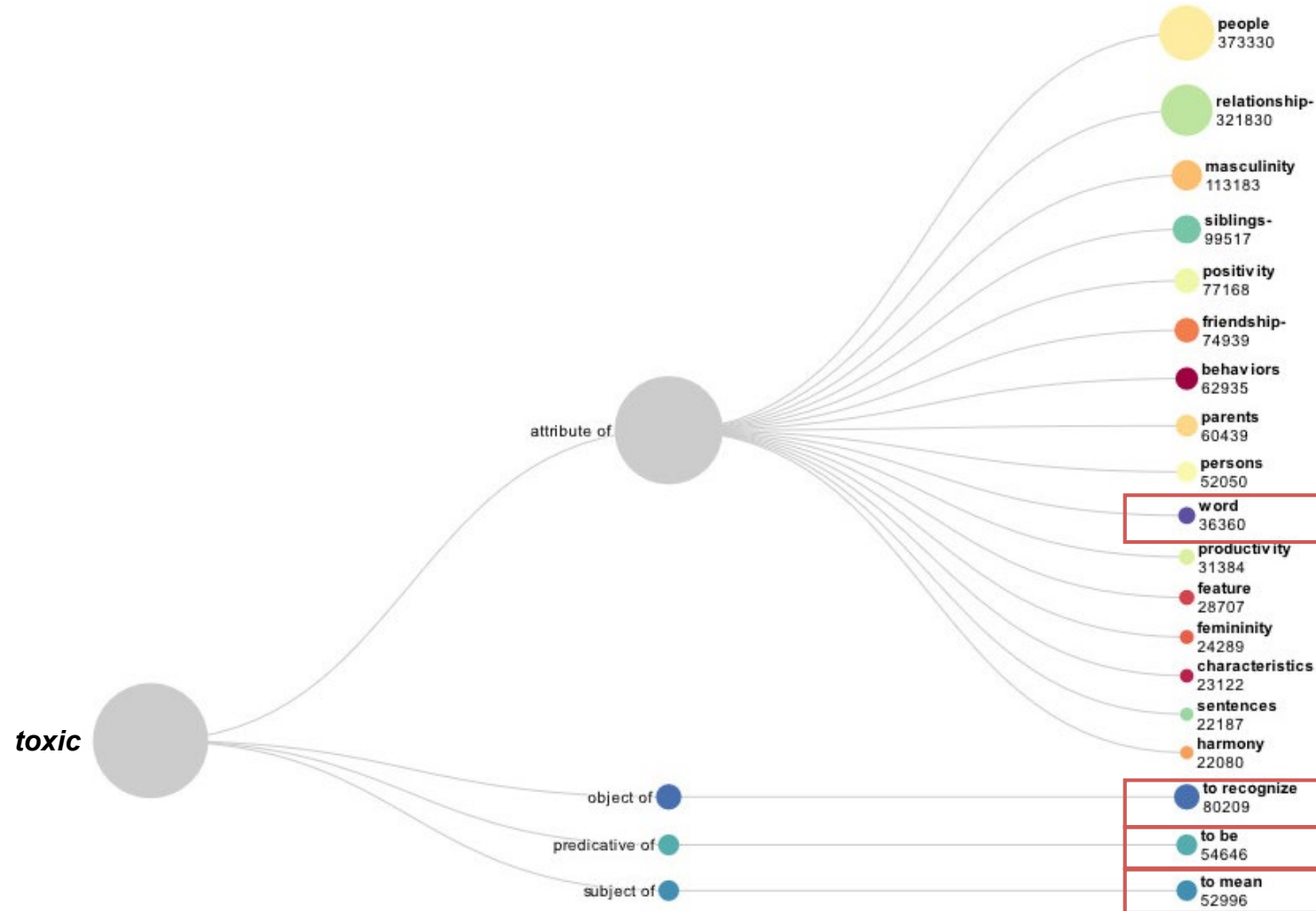


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What we can learn from the two studies

- 1) It's a rather new phenomenon to describe (negative) social circumstances (actions, people and so on), also shown by the corpus data (collocations with 'mean')
- 2) It is a multi-layered and multi-perspective phenomenon because
 - a) it is used towards different categories: Community (relationships, friendships), individual (behavior, certain people), STEM and
 - b) there are diverse associations.
- 3) It is strongly connected to the media discourse
- 4) The corpus data shows that even genuine positive things (productivity, positivity, harmony) can be labeled as *toxic*.





Thank you for your attention.

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Literature

Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1997): Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, London: Sage.

Spieß, Constanze (forth.): Repräsentationen aus der Perspektive der soziopragmatischen Diskurslinguistik. In: Toke Hoffmeister, Christina Kauschke & Mathias Scharinger (eds.): Repräsentationen aus linguistischer und interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Special Issue of Germanistische Linguistik.



What we mean by 'representations' of the toxic

Summary

“Meaning and representation seem to belong irrevocably to the interpretative side of the human and cultural sciences, whose subject matter - society, culture, the human subject - is not amenable to a positivistic approach (i.e. one which seeks to discover scientific laws about society). Later developments have recognized the necessarily interpretative nature of culture and the fact that interpretations never produce a final moment of absolute truth. Instead, interpretations are always followed by other interpretations, in an endless chain. As the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, put it, writing always leads to more writing. Difference, he argued, can never be wholly captured within any binary system (Derrida, 1981). So any notion of a final meaning is always endlessly put off, deferred.” (Hall 1997: 42)



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: Where have the people heard someone using the label ‘toxic’? (*perception*)

- **Connected to specific examples (36,32%):** toxic relationship/partnership (18,57%), toxic masculinity (8,20%), toxic friendships (2,49), and much more...
- **Media discourse (36,1%):** social media (15,35%), newspaper (online & print) (6,22%), internet (4,15%), TV (3,63%), media in general (3,22%), and some more...
- **Face to face communication (16,18%):** with friends & peers (10,58%), non-peer communication (5,39%), public discourse (0,21%)
- **Research (3,41%):** feminism & gender studies (1,35%), scientific talks and literature (0,93%), and other (1,13%)
- **Political positioning (0,62%):** politically left & ‘woke’ (0,41%), woke critical (0,21%)
- **Other (5,09%):** books and literature (2,59%), language use and daily life (1,04%), online gaming (0,52%), and other



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: How did the people understand the label 'toxic'? (perception)

- **Semantic correlates (55,91%):** harmful / damaging (14,90%), generally negative (not good / bad etc.) (11,97%), unhealthy (psychologically) / causing illness (10,26%), poisoned (8,55%), and much more...
- **References (20,75%):** perpetrator perspective (9,40%), victim / affected person perspective (6,47%), dependency perspective (2,81%), unbearable / stressful situation or atmosphere (1,34%), undesirable behavior (0,73%)
- **Structure (15,51%):** manipulation (6,11%), norm conflicts / power dynamics (4,88%), patterns / seriality / systematicity (1,95%), discrimination (1,59%), egoism / narcissism (0,98%)
- **Impact / effect (2,09%):** dishonesty / lying (0,49%), energy-sapping / exhausting (0,49%), injustice / unfair (0,24%), immoral / unethical (0,24%), and some more...
- **Examples and other (1,82%):** jealousy (0,49%), bullying (0,24%), and some other
- I don't use that term / can't remember etc. (3,79%)



What people mean by labeling something as 'toxic': Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: Which different entities do they label as 'toxic'? (*production*)

- **Nano level (Cognition) (1,31%):** ideas / attitudes / ideologies / values (1,02%), thoughts (0,29%)
- **Micro level (Individual) (24,88%):** behavior (14,26%), people (7,71%), statements (1,60%), characteristics (0,58%), and some more...
- **Meso level (Community) (49,62%):** relationships (26,20%), masculinity (9,89%), friendship (8,44%), working environment (3,20%), social situations (1,31%), femininity (0,58%)
- **Macro level (Society) (3,14%):** society in general (1,75%), atmosphere (0,72%), system / structure (0,58%)
- **STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (4,80%):** chemistry / science (brew, posions, radation etc.)
- I don't use that term / I don't know etc. (15,72%)



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: What is meant by labeling something as ‘toxic’?

- **Subjectification/socialization (29,32%):** Negative, threatening behavior / behavior patterns (14,93%), Negative consequences ☒ to a person, group, the ‘toxic’ person itself, vice versa (7,29%), manipulative behavior / blackmail (3,13%), wrong / unacceptable / problematic behavior (2,43%), and some more...
- **Deteriorating initial state (22,04%):** unhealthy / hurting (7,81%), destructive / dysfunctional / damaging (7,64%), poisonous (5,03%), dangerous (1,04%), stressful (0,52%)
- **Negative in general (13,01%):** not good / bad (6,94%), negative / stressful situation (3,82%), Negativity in general (1,39%), and some other...
- **Meta language (6,08%):** Evaluation in general / criticism / self-criticism (1,22%), citation from the internet (1,04%), awareness / clarification (0,87%), Warning / caution (0,69%), and more...s
- **Discourse perspective (4,85%):** Power asymmetry / imbalance (1,91%), Outdated world views / ideas (1,04%), and some more...
- **STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (2,59%):** Certain chemical substance / material (1,39%), foodstuff (0,69%), and some more...
- I don’t use that term / can’t remember etc. (22,05%)



What people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’: Study 1 – Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community

Results: What associations are connected to the attribute?

- **Semantic correlates (46,27%):** poisoned (20,17%), unhealthy (5,52%), harmful / destructive (5,25%), generally negative / bad (4,83%), dangerous / threatening (3,04%), negative effects on the body or psyche / depressive (2,49%), narcissistic / egotistical (2,21%), (potentially) fatal / life-threatening (1,52%), hurtful / humiliating (1,24%), and a lot more...
- **Attributive construction (13,95%):** relationship (8,29%), masculinity (5,66%)
- **Action structure (12,44%):** Manipulation (3,73%), Abuse / violence / (passive) aggression / blackmail (2,49%), Negative / harmful behavior (2,21%), Hierarchisation / power asymmetry / abuse of power (1,52%)
- **Discourse (6,37%):** Internet language / social media / internet culture (0,97%), buzzword / trend word (0,83%), woke (0,69%), enlightenment (0,55%), youth language (0,55%), and a lot more...
- **Personal connections (4,15%):** persons in general (1,66%), family (0,83%), ex partner (0,69%), friends (0,55%), and some more...
- **Pop culture (0,97%):** Britney Spears (song: toxic) (0,83%), pop culture in general (0,14%)
- And some more...

