

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The overall composition is clean and modern, with the text centered on a white background.

# What Did They Think?

## The Impacts of Gender, Gender Perception, and Community on Pronoun Usage

Leah Hamilton

# Research Questions

- ▶ What affects people's choices of gender-neutral third-person pronouns in online communities?
  - ▶ How does the gender of the speaker affect these choices?
  - ▶ How does the perceived gender makeup of the community affect these choices?

# Gender-Neutral Third-Person Pronouns

- ▶ The pronouns used when referring to a general member of a group who could be of any gender *or* when referring to a specific individual of unknown gender
  - ▶ I'll do a sketch of whoever wins, if she'd like me to.
  - ▶ In the demo... another Grazer came after Aloy to avenge their fallen brethren.
  - ▶ While explaining this to the fourth person, you notice his eyes have gone glassy...
- ▶ For the purposes of this study, this category does *not* include personal pronouns, which are third person pronouns used to refer to a specific individual in line with their preference (and which may or may not be gendered)

# Related Research

- ▶ Many similar studies pre-2000 looking at pronoun choice
- ▶ Most either fill in the blank or finish-the-sentence structure
  - ▶ Our Biology teacher has taught for many years. \_\_\_\_ is well-liked among the students.
  - ▶ After a nurse has completed training...
- ▶ Some studies used direct questions
  - ▶ When referring to your car, would you use 'he', 'she', or 'it'?
- ▶ Primarily interested in the effect that the antecedent had on pronoun choice
- ▶ Also looked at demographics of speaker and context of speech
  - ▶ Male vs female
  - ▶ Written vs verbal responses

# Hughes and Casey 1986

- ▶ Fill-in-the-blank
- ▶ Examined 10 different antecedents including “teacher”, “doctor”, and “anyone”.
  - ▶ If a runner falls down, \_\_\_ can get hurt.
- ▶ Conducted among third-graders, eighth-graders, and college students
- ▶ Examined age, gender, and antecedent as variables
  - ▶ Different antecedents influenced pronoun choice
  - ▶ Age-based variations for several antecedents
  - ▶ Different sentences for same antecedent influenced pronoun choice in some cases

# Martyna 1978

- ▶ Finish-the-sentence prompts
- ▶ Analyzed 18 antecedents in predetermined masculine, feminine, or neutral categories
  - ▶ Nurse is feminine, legislator is masculine, person is neutral
- ▶ Conducted among college students with verbal and written portions
- ▶ Examined gender, verbal/written response, and antecedent type as variables
  - ▶ Category of antecedent influenced pronoun choice
  - ▶ Women less likely to use the generic “he”
  - ▶ Written and verbal responses differed
  - ▶ Both studies found “he” to be the most common generic pronoun choice

# Methods

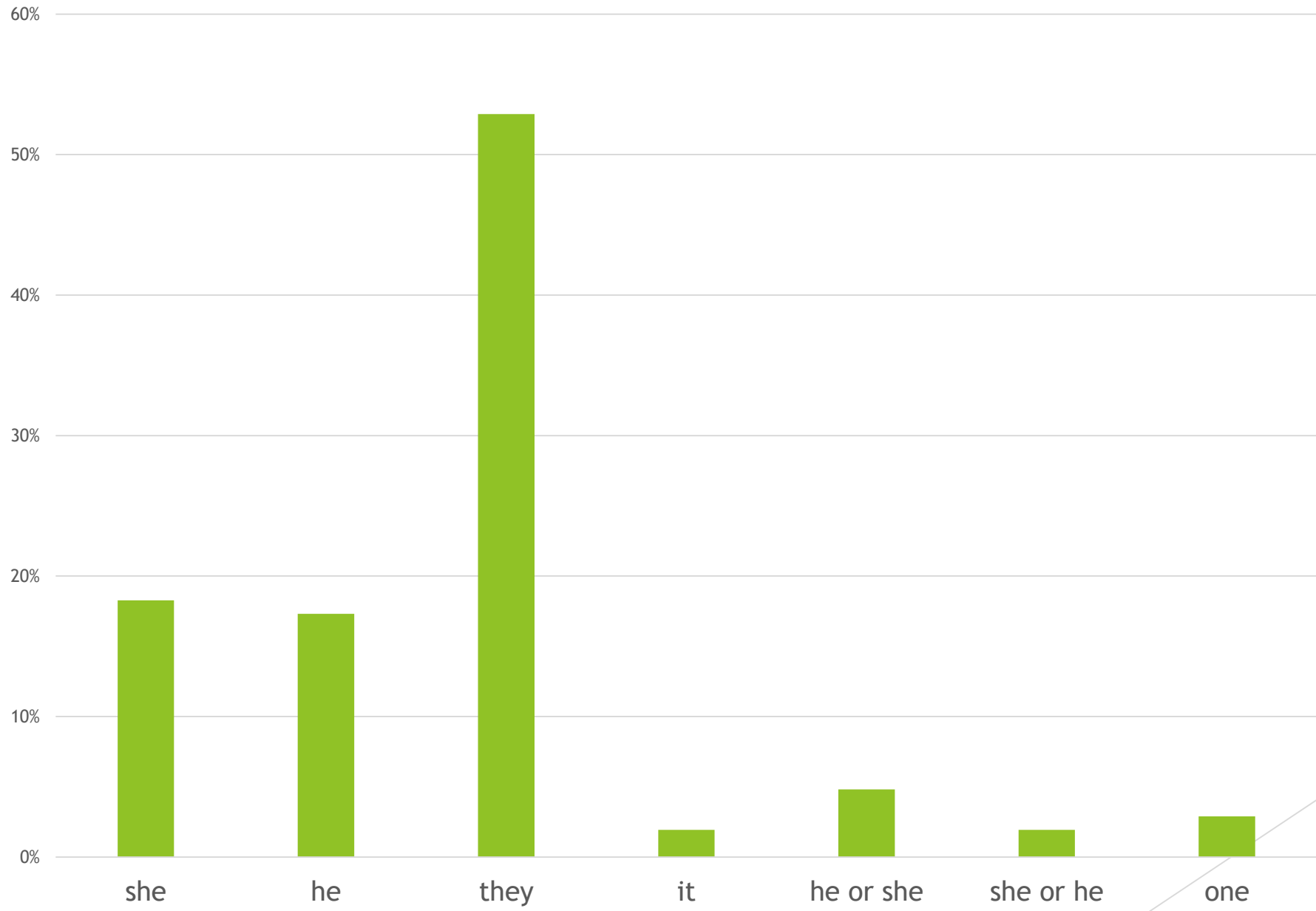
- ▶ Sampled relevant pronoun tokens from online blog posts and articles written by members of knitting and gaming communities
- ▶ Grammatical form of pronoun was ignored
  - ▶ They/them/their/theirs/themselves counted as “they”
- ▶ Multiple tokens with same antecedent in same space lumped together
  - ▶ ...the more angst the hero has, the more buckles they have on their clothing.
- ▶ Analyzed for variation based on
  - ▶ Gender of speaker
  - ▶ Perceived gender of community
  - ▶ Antecedent’s location inside/outside of community

# Response Demographics

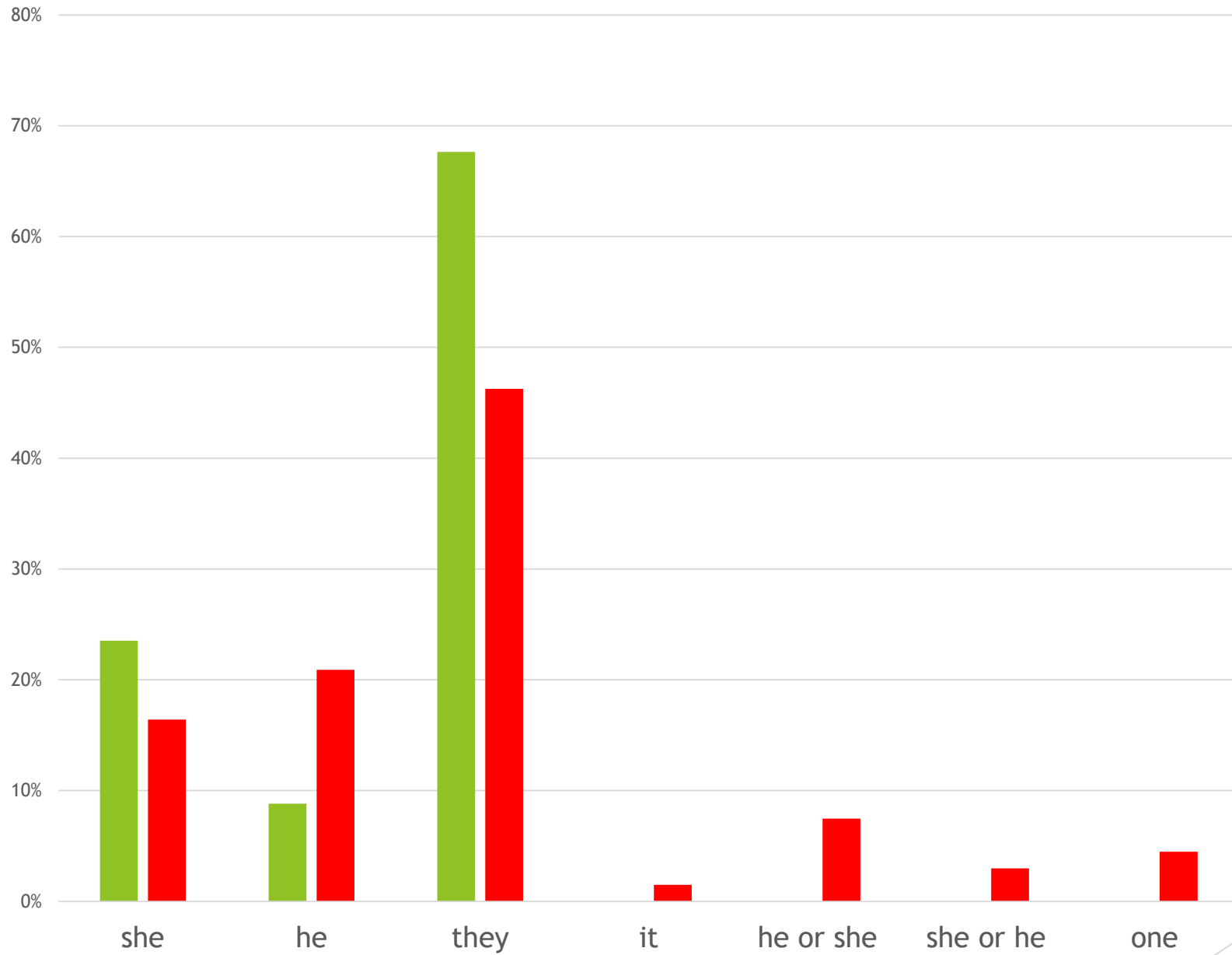
| Category        | # of Responses | % of Responses |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Gender          |                |                |
| Female          | 34             | 33%            |
| Male            | 67             | 64%            |
| Subculture      |                |                |
| Gamers          | 50             | 48%            |
| Knitters        | 54             | 52%            |
| Overall         |                |                |
| Male Knitters   | 29             | 28%            |
| Female Knitters | 25             | 24%            |
| Male Gamers     | 38             | 37%            |
| Female Gamers   | 9              | 9%             |



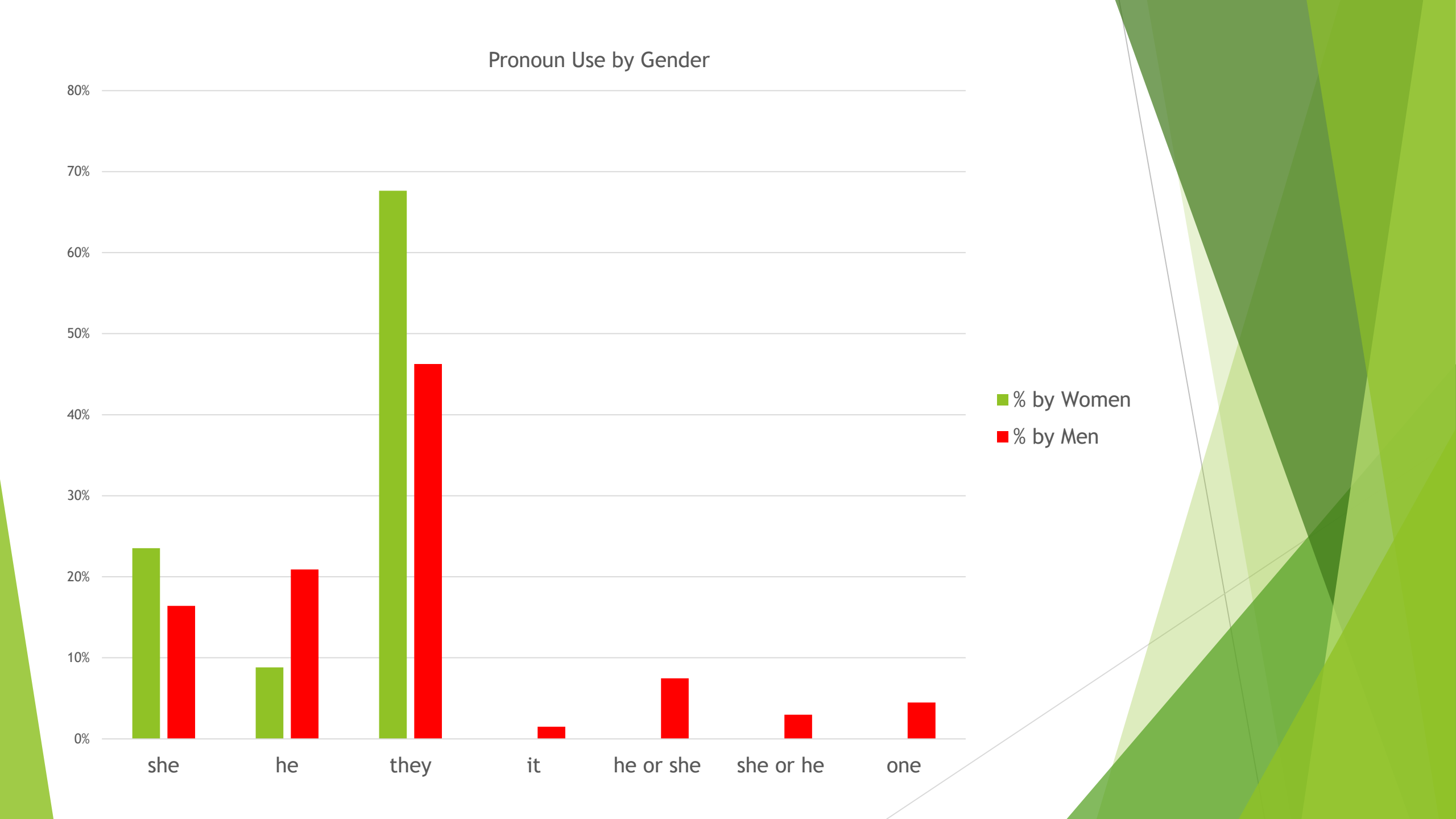
# Total Pronoun Percentages



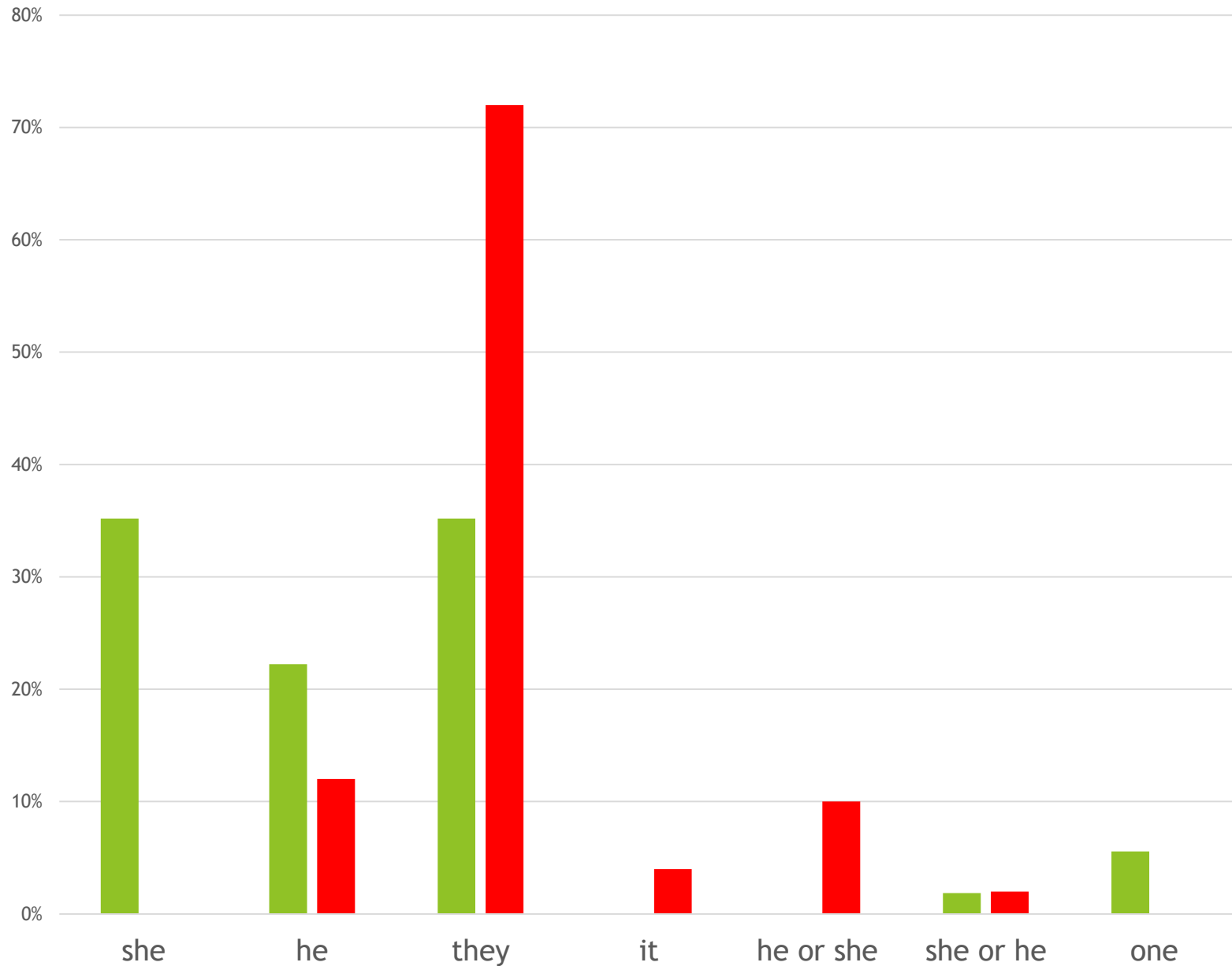
# Pronoun Use by Gender



■ % by Women  
■ % by Men



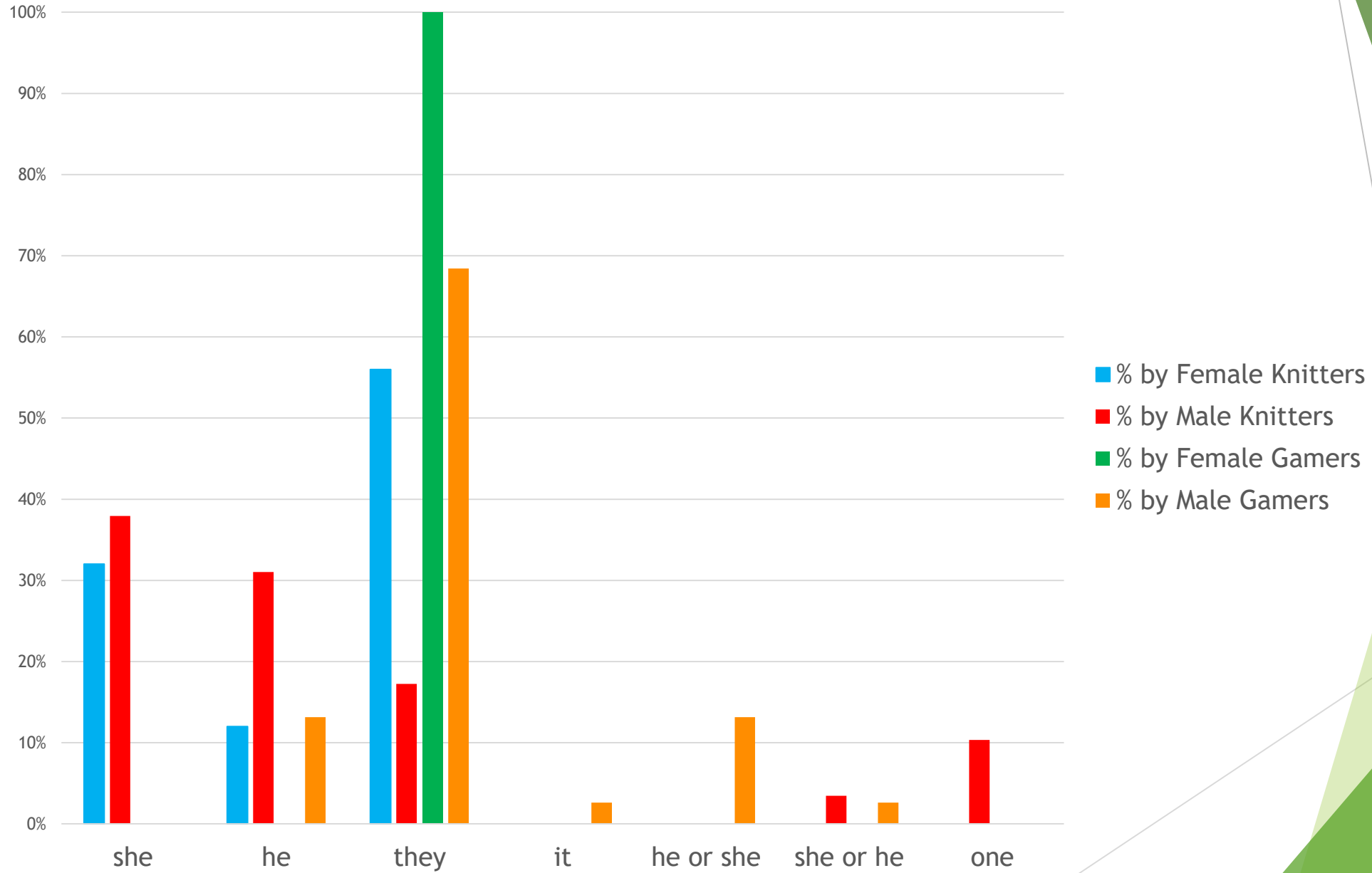
# Pronoun Use by Subculture



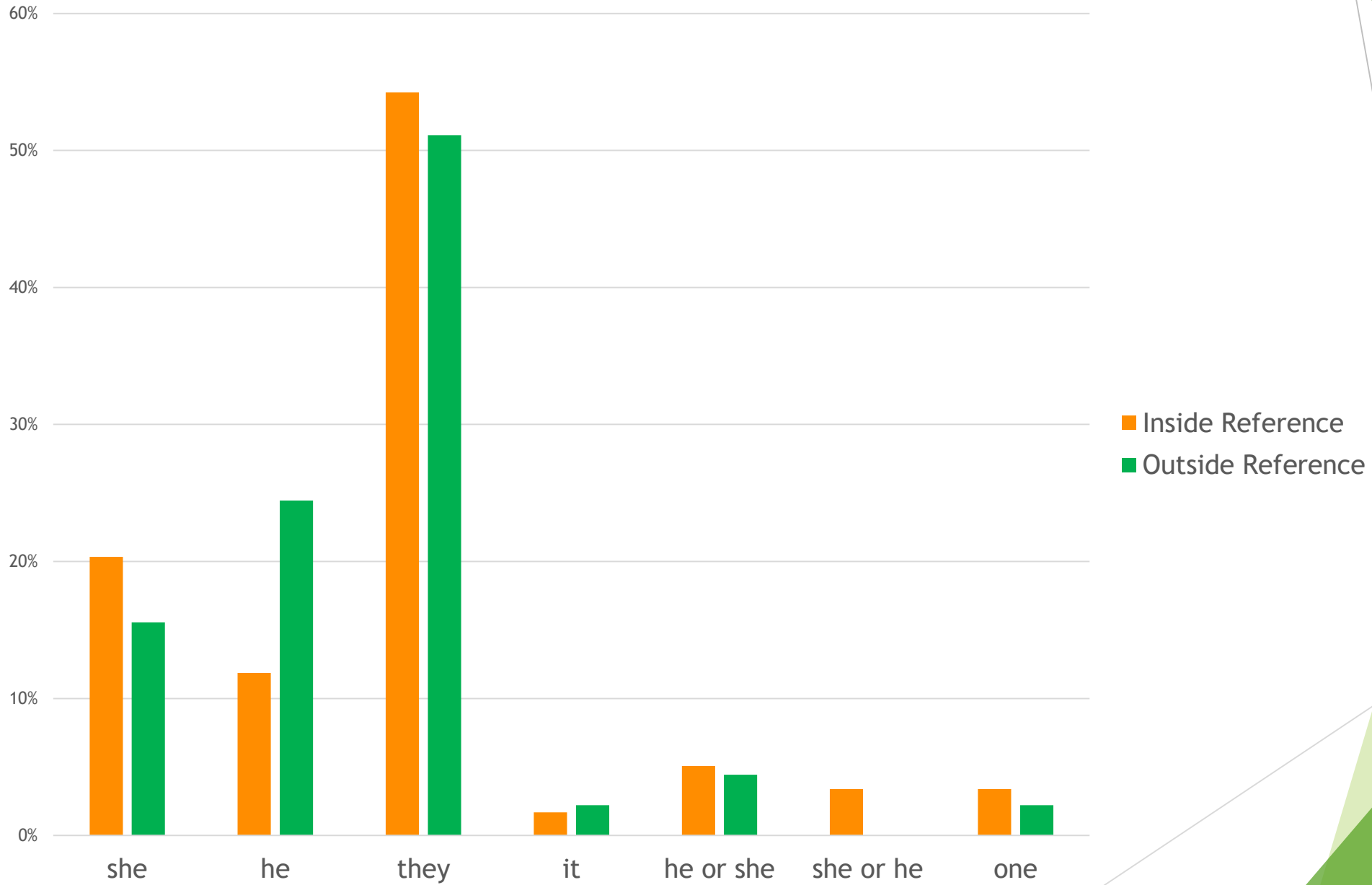
■ % by Knitters  
■ % by Gamers



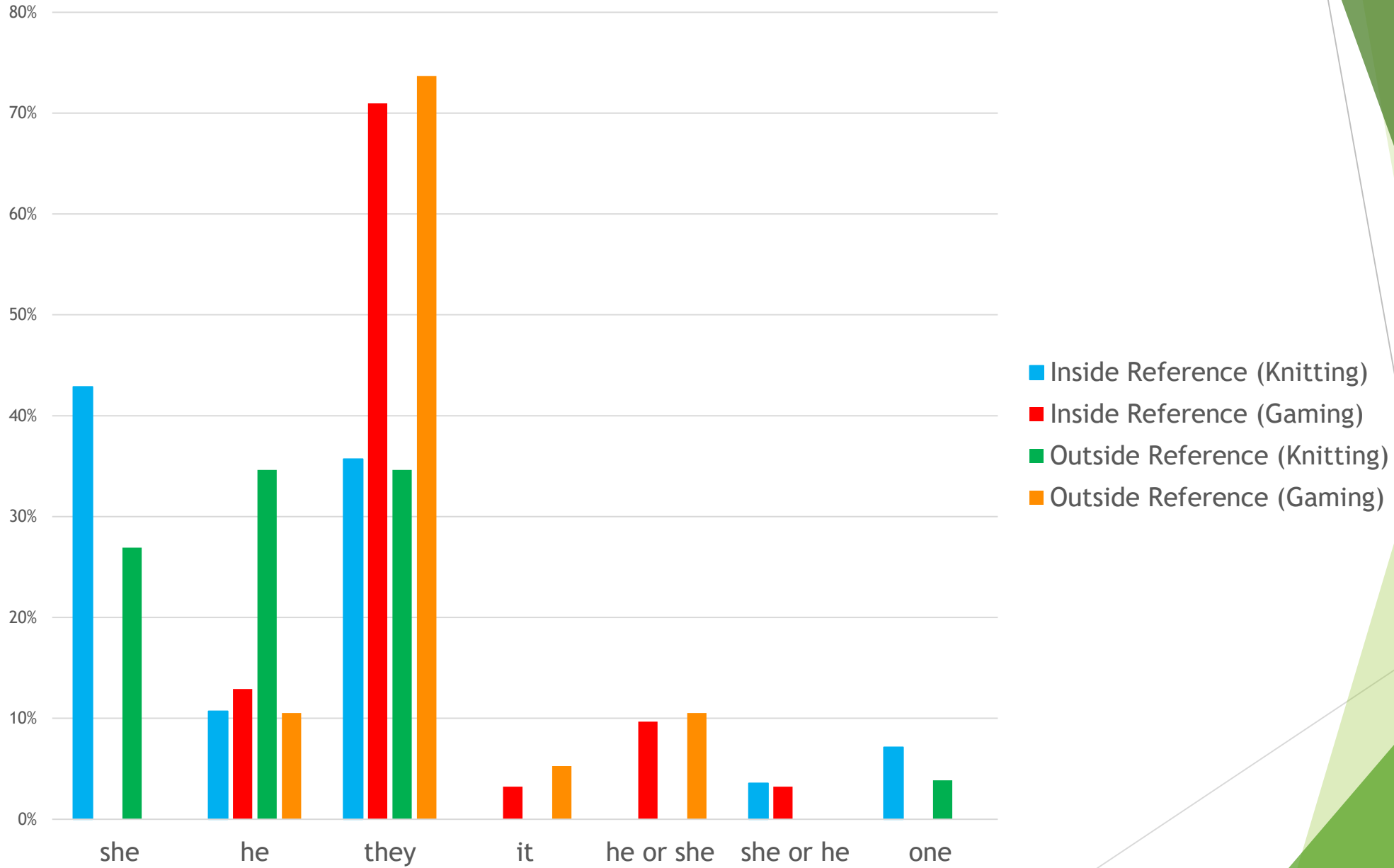
Pronoun Use by Gender and Subculture



Pronoun Use by Situation



Pronoun Use by Situation and Subculture



# Conclusion

- ▶ Gender and community affiliation both have impacts on pronoun usage
- ▶ Both of these variables interacted with each other and with other situational factors (like the position of the subject relative to the community)
  - ▶ Category of subject/antecedent did impact pronoun choice
- ▶ Females did use fewer tokens of “he”- agrees with Martyna
- ▶ “They” the most common overall, conflicting with both studies and with Martyna who found no “theys” in written text
  - ▶ Likely due to time (studies done in 70’s/80’s) or format difference (observation of natural speech)

# Limitations & Future Work

## ▶ Limitations

- ▶ Small sample size of female gamers
- ▶ Many bloggers/journalists worded their sentences to use “you” or plural they, avoiding the issue
- ▶ Knitting blogs are usually more casual, individual platforms, while many journalists are paid by one company to write on one gaming website.

## ▶ Future Work

- ▶ Comparing mass communication (e.g. journalism) and conversational data (e.g. discussion forums)
- ▶ Inclusion of Female-specific Gaming/Male-specific Knitting communities



# Sources

- ▶ Hughes, D. L. & Casey, P. L. (1986). Pronoun Choice For Gender-Unspecified Agent Words: Developmental Differences. *Language and Speech*, 29(1), 59-68. Retrieved from <http://las.sagepub.com/content/29/1/59.full.pdf+html>
- ▶ Martyna, W. (1978). What Does 'He' Mean? Use of the Generic Masculine. *Journal of Communication*, 28(10), 131-138. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1978.tb01576.x/abstract>