

The social media response to an Australian PrEP seroconversion

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Introduction

In March 2019, news of an individual in Sydney, Australia who contracted HIV while taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) circulated rapidly on social media, following an interview with the individual published in the *Star Observer*. A content analysis of online social media produced in response to the event was undertaken to investigate the general public's perception and understanding of PrEP.

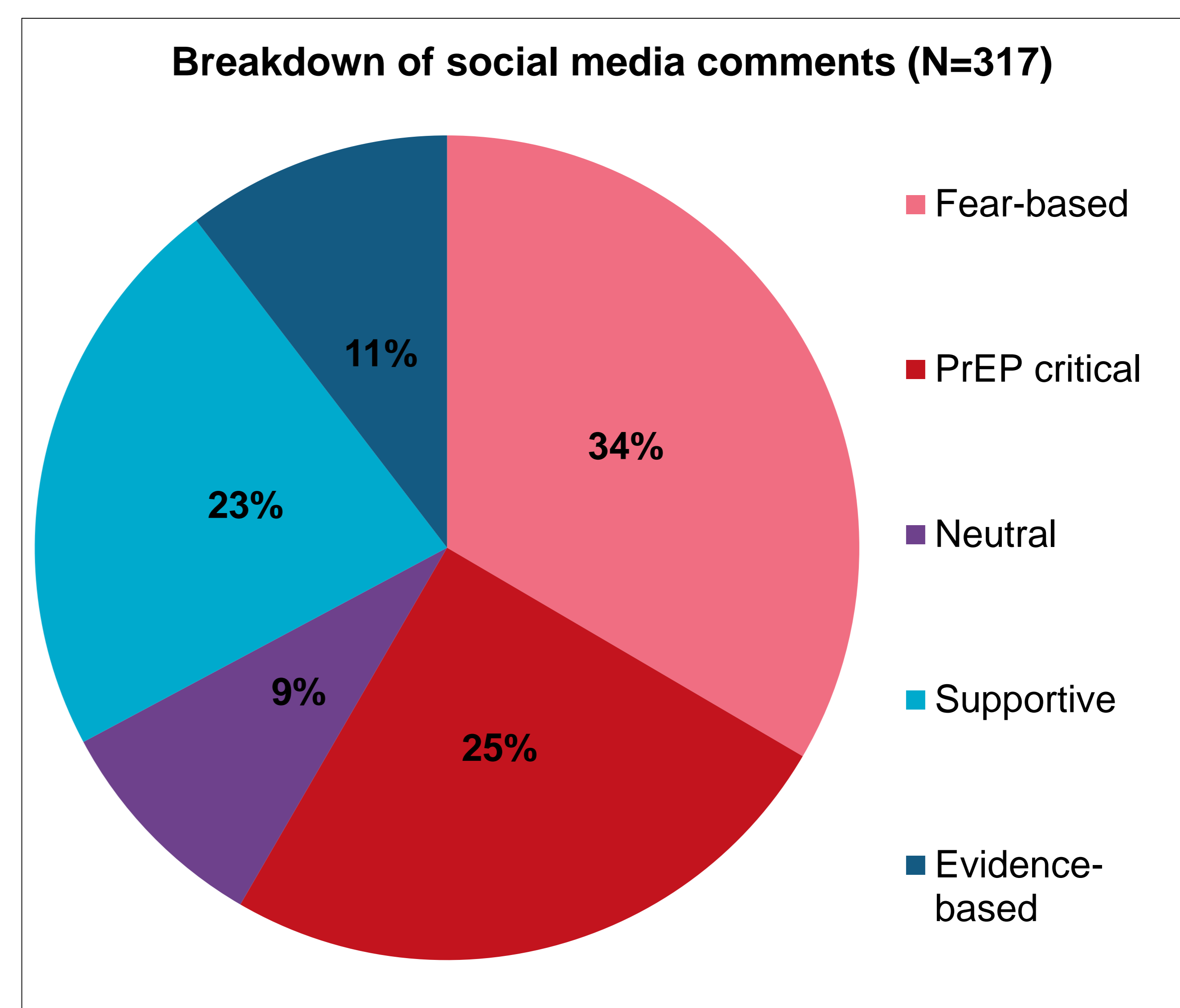
Methods

Key articles about this news event were published online on the Facebook and Twitter pages for the *Star Observer* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on 22 March 2019. The publicly available comments were downloaded and analysed using a 5-point Likert-like scale. This scale was developed for an analysis of a previous Australian HIV seroconversion event that was reported on social media and described at the 2017 ASHM conference ¹.

Results

These articles generated considerable attention, amassing over 1,000 likes, comments, and shares. After excluding comments that were not directly related to the seroconversion story, 317 comments were included in this analysis.

- One-third of comments (34%) expressed fear or stigma of HIV, homosexuality, or PrEP (“fear-based”).
- A further 25% were critical of PrEP use, its effectiveness or its impact on the sexual behaviour of gay men (“PrEP-critical”).
- 23% expressed support for PrEP and/or the individual who contracted HIV (“supportive”).
- 11% of the comments referred to evidence about the efficacy of PrEP or the effectiveness of on-demand PrEP dosing schedules (“evidence-based”).



Conclusions

The publication of these articles generated a highly emotive response on social media. Negative commentary came from two main perspectives, criticism of on-demand PrEP and stigma towards HIV or homosexuality. There is a **need for more education about PrEP**, particularly effective non-daily dosing strategies. Many of the **comments towards gay men and people living with HIV were concerning** and point to **enduring societal stigma that must be addressed**. It also suggests the **need for greater protections for minority groups online** from hate speech, vilification and online attacks.

Social media analyses can provide valuable insights into ongoing discussions and serve as a **litmus test for gauging community sentiment**, while **minimising the impact of social desirability bias on research**. Social media is a powerful tool and can provide a unique opportunity to identify gaps in knowledge and direct people to suitable resources. **Timely intervention and community education could aim to address misinformation**, shifting norms and attitudes to ensure that people are free from personal attacks in both online and offline spaces.

¹ Vaccher S, Kolstee J, Holt M, Haire B, and Prestage G. A content analysis of social media discourse following a case of seroconversion on PrEP. Australasian HIV & AIDS Conference, 8 November 2017, Canberra, Australia.

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