Exploring LGBTQ+ Labels:
Body Image and Self-Identity

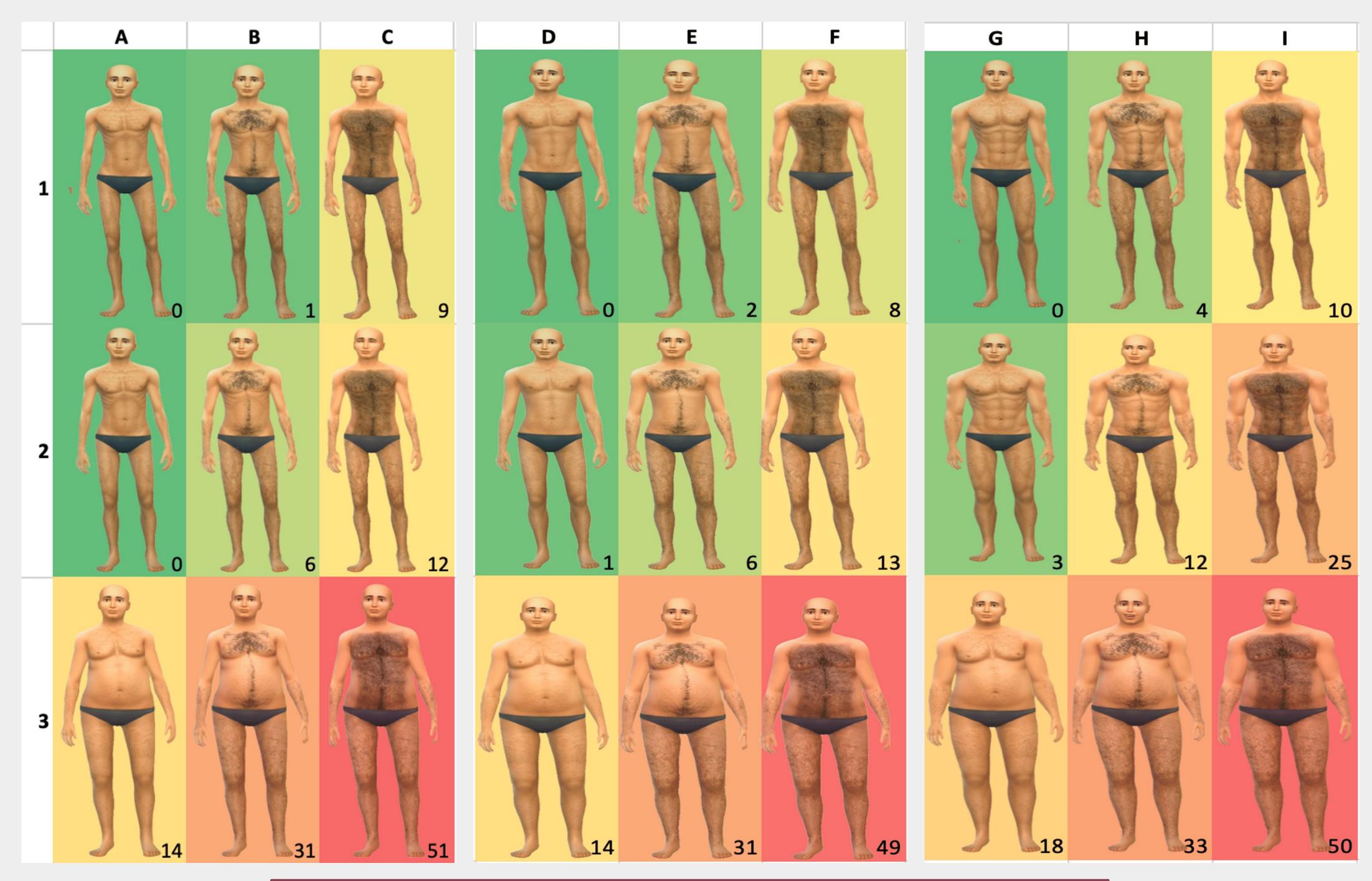Vinchenzo Vassalotti | Mentor: Michael Kaschak

Introduction:

- The usage of group labeling terminology seems to generate a body and social image stigma for members within the community it refers to.
  - To what extent does this labeling lead to issues concerning body image, self-value, and personal identity?

- These labels are often vaguely understood, and don't contain concrete parameters of what body types these terms refer to.

- The goal of this study was to understand what constitutes the body type of a "Bear", what ingrained social stigmas it, and other labels, may carry and how general labeling affects the LGBTQ+ community from an in-group perspective.

- Our results have emphasized parameters such as moderate to heavy body weight, moderate to heavy body hair, and having a masculine identity over being of the male sex. There has also been a highlight on labels having a severe, harmful effect on certain community identities.

Methods:

- The study began with the usage of three body-selection tasks varying in 'body hair', 'weight' and 'muscularity'. It was then followed by a survey.

  - The task utilized body-visualization software, commonly known as *The Sims 4*. The participant had the option to multi-select what bodies fit their personal view of the label "Bear".

  - The subsequent survey homed in on what characterized the label from a non-visual perspective, as well as explored personal views on labeling within the Queer community.

These graphs above are 'heatmaps' that represent the variability in the body-selection task.

. Green represents a body identified as least identifiable to the label "Bear". Orange and red represent the most selected bodies to fit the label.

The selection counts are out of 52 participants

All three heatmaps emphasize a trend of participants selecting the extremes in terms of 'body weight' and 'body hair amount' to define "Bear".

References:

- Erling1974. (2016). Erling1974_BodyHair_007. https://erling1974.tumblr.com/page/3.

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- Moskowitz, D. A., Turrubiates, J., Lozano, H., & Hajek, C. (2013, April 24). *Physical, behavioral, and psychological traits of gay men identifying as bears - archives of sexual behavior*. SpringerLink. Retrieved March 7, 2022, from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-013-0095-z#citeas

- The Sims 4 (PC version) [Video game]. (2014) . EA Games.

Results:

- The body task and survey emphasized three key characteristics of the "Bear" identity:
  - Moderate-to-heavy body weight, a masculine identity and high body hair.
  - Physique, or muscularity, was found to not be an important factor in defining "Bears".

- All participants found labels to have an influence on body- and self-identity.
  - Gay men were identified to find label usage the most *harmful generally and personally* of any group.
  - Lesbian women were identified to find label usage the most *personally helpful*.

- From a sexual-orientation perspective:
  - Lesbian women had the most clustered analysis of "Bears". Their responses often arranged around the same choices in both the task and survey response.
  - Bisexual and 'Queer' individuals had the most fluidity in defining- less clustering.

Discussion:

- The college-aged demographic was essential to this study. It is a time of self-worth generation and sexual experimentation. As emphasized by the harm found in the Gay Male community, these labels have an intense emotional relationship with self-identity.

- Utilizing demographic-reflective participants for research studies on marginalized identities provided key understanding to how varying community members view and utilize labels.

- This research study is a crucial to understanding a variety of social terminology we use. This study could be applied to a variety of socially-stigmatized terms we use.