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Photovoice as a Window into Social Cognition: Investigating Holistic Expressions of Minoritized Identity

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Abstract

The present study used a community-oriented photovoice approach to explore the lived experiences of $n = 20$ individuals with minoritized identities through participant-taken photographs, investigating identity in everyday contexts. The study aimed to understand how identity can influence daily life and social interaction, as well as validate this photovoice methodology for future work on identity expression, minoritized experience, and its potential applications for studying social cognition. Capturing local Hawai'i individuals' minoritized identity expression further allows for a cultural exploration of identity in this multicultural environment. Utilizing a qualitative photovoice methodology provided a nuanced first-person understanding of minoritized identity outside of an academically imposed view in participants' everyday lives to observe themes of community, nature, and culture. Using a photovoice method to capture visual evidence of identity expression at participants' convenience enhances ecological richness, which is crucial for innovating future methodological designs studying minoritized identity expression for social and cognitive implications.

Keywords: photovoice, minoritized identity, identity expression, social cognition

Introduction

The present study used a community-oriented approach employing a photovoice method to explore the lived experiences of individuals with minoritized identities through participant-taken photographs. The present study offers a deeper understanding of the aspects of everyday life that comprise identity. Cultural developmental niche models (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1994) outline the interaction between the individual and their environment, highlighting the more holistic aspects of identity development that can have direct implications for social cognitive processes. The holistic way of processing the self, where the development of one's identity is shaped by the surrounding environment, can optimize social cognitive processes surrounding ingroup and outgroup identification. Rather than viewing the self as contextualized within one identity (e.g., Asian), the flexible boundaries create a cognitive situation where the individual must be comfortable with broader boundaries of group identification, thereby creating a more welcoming perspective of ingroup inclusion. This conceptualization is similar to the interdependent self-construal, as discussed by Markus and Kitayama (1991), but extended beyond relational thinking with others to an application to identity group membership itself.

This project also supports photovoice as a methodology that delves deeper than standard interview settings by engaging participants in directly capturing their experiences through photography. Capturing local Hawai'i individuals' minoritized identity expression further allows for

understanding of identity conception in a multicultural context, broadening implications of having a dual or multiple identities cognitively classified as one "ingroup." By utilizing this qualitative photovoice methodology, the study intended to investigate a nuanced understanding of minoritized identity expressions outside an academic setting in participants' everyday lives. Giving this agency to the participants will also promote accessibility and celebration of a diverse sample. This study not only gained a deeper understanding of everyday examples of identity expression but also serves to understand the emotional valence of identity expression. Further, the photovoice method contributes to conducting effective research and gathering data that can offer unique insights into first-person perspectives that are currently uncommonly observed.

Minoritized Identity

The sociocultural context of an individual's identity (i.e., which social group memberships an individual holds within a broader cultural environment) is essential to understanding how certain identities are minoritized and hold less social power than others. Hays (2001) identifies domains of social privilege in the ADDRESSING model. This outline of higher vs. lower privileged groups across different social domains (e.g., age, disability, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) shows how an individual's privilege varies beyond a single group membership. The intersectionality of multiple lower-privileged identities can lead to "double jeopardy," increasing the risk of adverse social effects due to one's identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). This increased risk shapes social cognition by influencing how individuals anticipate, interpret, and respond to social interactions (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007). This can look like heightened vigilance to threat, expectations of bias, and meaning-making around other behaviors and evaluations.

As Larkin et al. (2011) argue, it is imperative for experimental cognitive science to incorporate qualitative and narrative methodology because cognition is embedded in social, cultural, and relational contexts. If cognition is embodied and situated, then in order to understand how people make meaning of their lived experiences, qualitative methodology is essential. This is particularly prevalent for the present study. Looking at identity expression, which could encapsulate multiple identities at once (e.g., being a woman of color rather than being a woman and also a person of color), underscores how the lived experience of minoritized individuals can affect cognition. The cultural context of one's development helps understand how certain

identities are socially minoritized, how identity is personally constructed, and how identity is dynamically socially constructed.

Models of Identity Development Multiple developmental models portray how a cultural environment influences a child's development and value acquisition (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1994; Whiting, 1977; Worthman, 2010). This influences one's overarching sense of self as they situate their role in society. Commonalities amongst these models include the concept of nature (what is biologically innate) versus nurture (how environmental contexts influence development). Harkness and Super (1994) most explicitly include lived experience in their developmental niche model, which the present study uses as a framework for exploring minoritized identity in an individual's everyday life. This perspective encompasses numerous experiences (explicit and implicit messages communicated about identity groups, microaggressions, witnessing, and/or being a victim of discriminatory acts committed by others). Parental beliefs, goals, and feelings interact with customs and norms within a developing child's community to mold perceived normative behavioral expectations. Social values (positive and negative) surrounding various social identities are transmitted throughout one's development, which, in turn, are internalized to compound what constitutes a subjective feeling of having a minoritized identity. For example, Black men in America internalize the stigma associated with being Black, socially communicated by associations with criminality, and adjust their behavior to appear less threatening to mitigate potential prejudice (Hester & Grey, 2018; Welsh, 2007). Studying identity from an everyday perspective helps understand the subjective and individualized experience of living with a minoritized identity.

Other models of identity development also outline the development of a specific social identity (e.g., a disability identity) through stages of interacting with others in their community/environment. Gibson's (2006) Disability Identity Development Model primarily applies to late-onset/acquisition of disability but can still be applied to other developmental disabilities such as autism (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016). It is important to note that all the developmental models mentioned are situated within an individual's sociocultural context. The present study focuses on Hawai'i, which offers a diverse multicultural environment through a historically diverse integration of multiple cultural values (Okamura, 1980). Native Hawaiian ethnocultural values, along with other cultural values, are integrated into local Hawai'i culture. Local people hold a unique cultural perspective of ethnicity and intergroup relations (Pauker et al., 2018), which provides insight into minoritized identity and expressions.

Photovoice Methodology

Prior work in disability studies and investigating mental health sets a precedent for using photovoice as a form of

accessible nonverbal data collection (Krisson et al., 2021). Photovoice can also be referred to as "reflexive photography" as it captures an emotional component of the participants' photographic focus (Douglas, 1998; Gold, 2004). In disability studies, photovoice has been used to study autistic individuals' sense of self as traditional interview settings are not accommodating to those with differences in verbal communication and/or difficulty with expressing internal experiences (DeVault, 2022; Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2013; Teti et al., 2016). This is not only helpful for specialized populations, as photovoice offers a fun and engaging bridge between empirically driven research goals and sparking community interest in research participation.

Photovoice can be used to capture impressions and feelings (e.g., about transitional academic periods, Megarg et al., 2018) that cannot be communicated through words. Qualitative interview studies, such as Mosley & Rosenberg (2007), dive into prejudice awareness but don't go further into what participants' lives look like based on that awareness. Studies such as this would benefit from visual information showcasing everyday environmental factors in participants' lives. In a review of other photovoice studies on disability, Macdonald et al. (2019) report common themes of "representation" and "knowledge exchange" observed along with community, empowerment, and barriers (including attitudinal barriers). Macdonald et al. (2021) captured both negative (e.g., judgment, exclusion from others) and positive (e.g., advocacy, claiming identity) experiences in a feminist disability study with a sample of six women photographers. The present study expects to observe similar broad themes of negative and positive representations of the participants' identities. Macdonald et al. (2021) demonstrate that photovoice can successfully capture identity expression in both explicit and emotive ways. The present study broadened the scope to expressions of identity in one's everyday life to expand the content that can be documented and include cultural artifacts that can't be included within a self-portrait (e.g., cooking traditions). Symbolic representations were expected to convey identity through common, even stereotypical, depictions that are readily understood to be associated with a given identity (e.g., rainbow Pride flags or pins for LGBTQ+ identity). Overall, the present study aimed to investigate first-person perspectives of identity expression with minoritized individuals and further validate the method for future research related to identity and social cognition.

Method

Participants

Criterion sampling recruited $n = 20$ adults local to Hawai'i based on self-identification with a minoritized ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and/or disability status, which is sufficient for a qualitative phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were recruited from courses taught at the researchers' university and advertisements shown in the community. Prospective participants had to have lived in

Hawai'i for at least 10 years and reside in Hawai'i during the two-week participation period to ensure accessibility to their cultural/identity artifacts. This requirement enabled them to photograph their cultural items effectively, enhancing the authenticity and cultural representation of the project. Most participants ($n = 14$) reported more than one minoritized identity. Participant age ranged from 18 to 56 years old ($M = 24.2$). The sample consisted of 60% female participants, 20% male participants, and 20% nonbinary participants. Most participants listed Ethnicity as a minority identity ($n = 16$), while ($n = 11$) listed gender, ($n = 8$) listed sexuality, and ($n = 1$) listed 'other'. None of the participants identified solely as White/Caucasian; yet four participants did not select 'Ethnicity' as one of their minoritized identities. Participants submitted between 7 and 93 photographs ($M = 33.25$), producing a total of 665 images.

Apparatus and Materials

The present study utilized Google Forms for a Pre-Study Survey and Post-Study Survey, 10 digital cameras for participants to use during their two-week data collection period, and a lab desktop computer to upload photos from the SD card in the digital camera to the desktop (via USB SD card reader). Google Drive (Docs) was used to collect participants' descriptions of their photos taken, enabling the ability to share the participants' photos and descriptions with them via a Google Folder to save for their own records.

Procedure

Participants completed the Pre-Study Survey to determine their eligibility for participating (i.e., if they are 18 years of age or older, have a minoritized identity, live in Hawai'i, and will be residing in Hawai'i during their participation) and to schedule their camera pick-up and drop-off appointments. At the pick-up appointment, the researcher overviewed the study, went over the informed consent form, and showed them how to use the camera if they were unfamiliar with digital cameras (e.g., the on/off button). Participants were instructed to take photos related to their minoritized identity, but that could look like whatever they felt was appropriate. They were also told that they could take as many or as little photos as they would like, but with the explicit warning that they would be asked to provide brief descriptions of 10 of the photos later, so to try to have at least 10. The drop-off appointment lasted approximately one hour, during which photos were downloaded from the digital camera to a lab desktop computer and uploaded to a Google Drive. The participants then provided brief descriptions of at least 10 photos in the Google Drive. Finally, participants completed the Post-Study Survey to reflect on the challenges and personal significance of their participation. They were thanked for their participation, and their photos were shared with them to save if they wished.

Data Analysis

The photographic data was first imported into a spreadsheet with a page per participant alongside the participants' (if

applicable) photo descriptions. To aid in the hybrid iterative content analysis, two trained research assistants (RAs) provided objective photo descriptions for each individual photo. After this stage, the research team was familiarized with the data sufficiently to generate a preliminary list of themes and begin a top-down coding procedure. Both the photo/objective description and the participant's photo description were taken into consideration when coding. Each photo was allotted up to three themes, but not required to include more than one theme (e.g., a photo that was a "picture of ocean outlook with rock" only was identified with the primary theme of Nature; a photo that was a "selfie in dorm room wearing shirt with puakenikeni lei pattern" was identified with the primary theme of Clothing/Jewelry, but additionally Self and Hawai'i Specific). If the photo description by the participant conveyed a deeper theme that could not be readily detected by an outside viewer, that took precedence over the photographic content (e.g., a photo of "an Apple watch showing completing a workout" had a participant photo description of, "physical health is important to be able to take care of yourself and be independent, but also have the physical strength to be able to take care of any elders that need extra assistance," leading to the primary theme of Community, then the secondary theme of Activity/Fun). After the initial round of coding where the two RAs each coded half of the participants (10 each), only an additional new theme of Political warranted inclusion based on one participant including meaningful political content in one of their photos. Due to the noticeable volume of nature-related photos taken around campus, a further theme was added of Nature + Campus to identify that the theme of Nature was distinct from greenery encountered solely on the university campus. In the second round of coding, the RAs switched which participants they reviewed, and specifically looked for any additional inclusions of Political, revisions to combine Nature with Campus, or further applicable themes missed within the first round of coding. Due to full agreement across the primary themes identified and minimal disagreements for the secondary or tertiary themes (which were discussed and quickly resolved, often only surrounding the order listed), the coding process concluded after this second round.

Results

The thematic analysis and coding procedure described above was used to evaluate the photographs as well as the related participant description. Deeper consideration of the meanings across the themes and the applicability to understanding minoritized identity are discussed below, along with the frequency results of each theme. The overarching finding that emerged across the themes was that participants overwhelmingly represented their identities in a holistic way. As elaborated on later, identity was documented almost exclusively beyond symbolic representations (contrary to the predicted findings), implying that categorical labels of identity do not capture how identity is internalized.

Thematic Findings

The thematic frequency was obtained both within individual participants and across participants, allowing for identification of representation (and over-representation) of thematic content (see Figure 1 for average code representations across participants). The most frequent average theme, as expected, was Community (occurring 14.2 times per participant), which referenced any photographic or written content related to friends, family, community, or relationships. The second most frequent average theme was Nature (12.2 times), which was expected due to the Hawai'i location and regular everyday engagement with nature (e.g., beach/ocean and hiking trails, but also greenery and mountain ranges present near campus, home/residence areas, and on drives to and from of the main Honolulu city). Food was another expected theme that is related to local culture, but it was not expected to be the third most frequently represented at 10.3 average times per participant. Interestingly, Environment was present on average 9.9 times per participant, which was defined as (non-nature) buildings, structures, part of their everyday routine, or what seemed to be a first-person capture of what the participant was currently viewing. This particular theme, in paired context with other themes like Activity/Fun, Other Culture, and Work, provides insights into how one's everyday environment does meaningfully reflect their self-concept and relate to their minoritized identity through embodiment.

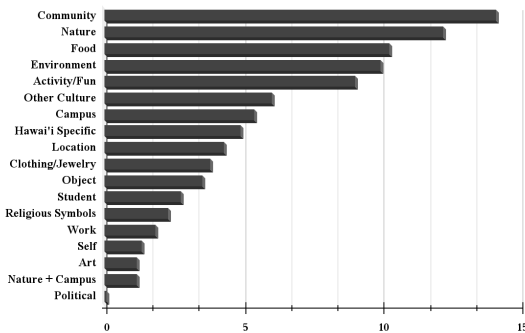


Figure 1: Average Code Representations.

Images further reflected cultural artifacts and practices, interpersonal relationships, metaphoric representations, and self-expressions. Other codes like Work, Self, Art, and Nature + Campus were meaningfully present, but only for a small number of participants. Political was an exception where only one participant took political-related content, but with enough to warrant inclusion in the results. Most of the codes found were prevalent to all participants, even if applicable to only one photo. The varied representations of codes demonstrate the general distribution of codes throughout participants (see Figure 2). Each color on the graph in Figure 2 represents an individual participant on the y-axis, and the codes are represented on the x-axis; more colors per code indicate more participant representation of that particular code.

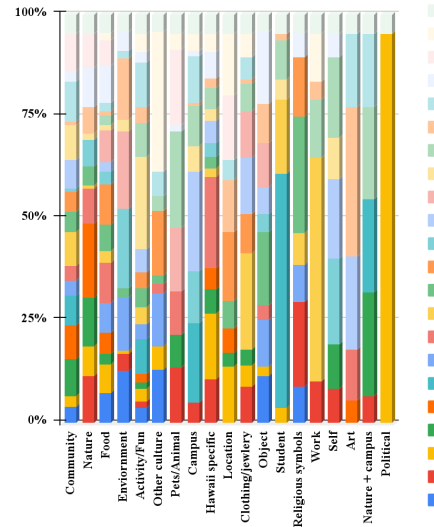


Figure 2: Representations of Codes by Participant.

Similar to the average frequency, the most prevalent code across individual participants was Community. Almost all participants used photographs of friends and family to illustrate their identities and connections, often linking these relationships to cultural and community belonging. For example, one participant described photographing friends from the LGBTQ+ community as a way of reflecting their ongoing interactions within their community. Another important and frequent code found was Food, which was integral to many cultural practices for many of the participants. The Food code emerged as a prominent marker of identity and belonging, often tied to Hawai'i's multicultural environment. For instance, one participant highlighted a local dish (Chicken Katsu from L&L Drive In, a famous local restaurant) as representative of their cultural landscape. Nature was an important category, with photos capturing participants' natural environments, highlighting how the natural environment often creates the groundwork of identity formation for people in Hawai'i. Many of the Nature photos were unique to Hawai'i, emphasizing the role of place in shaping cultural identity. Together, the thematic and photographic content observed was overwhelmingly non-identity label specific. Even Religious Symbols were not inherently tied to a particular ethnic identity. In that, the most notable overarching finding of this study is the holistic representation of everyday engagements and expressions of the self itself, beyond any categorical or stereotypical representations of one's minoritized identity.

In some cases, photo content and descriptions diverged. As previously described in the Method, participant descriptions took priority over objective photographic content. For instance, a photo of a mountain was described

by the participant as the backdrop of their family farm, where they are able to feed their community. This resulted in the corresponding primary code to be ‘Food’ and a secondary code of ‘Community’ before ‘Nature’ (see Table 1a). Another example is a photo of a participant's tattoo, with the description revolving around the connection that this tattoo brings to their family and community (see Table 1b). Other examples were more straightforward, such as an altar in a participant's home, which would be coded under ‘Religious Symbol’ (see Table 1c). This suggests that the reflective descriptions provided critical insight into participants’ intended meanings beyond the visible content.

Table 1: Example Photos With Their Primary Code.

		
a. Food	b. Community	c. Religious Symbol

Methodological Findings

The post-study survey provided insight into participants’ experiences with photovoice as a method. Most participants ($n = 16$) reported thinking about their identity more than usual during the project, and the majority ($n = 13$) expressed feeling more positively about their identity as a result of participation. This supports that participants did actively engage with their participation and take photos with intentionality. Relatedly, the positive impact of participation itself can offer an avenue for follow-up discussions (e.g., focus groups) to facilitate connection over lived experience. Half of the sample ($n = 10$) wished they had more time than the allotted two weeks to capture their photos, suggesting that a longer engagement period may enhance data richness. Preferences for equipment varied, where half ($n = 10$) enjoyed using the digital cameras provided, while others would have preferred their personal phone cameras and some participants suggested an option using a mix of pictures from the digital camera and pictures on their personal phones would have been ideal. Overall, 65% of the participants reported feeling more positive about their identity after completing the study, and only one participant reported feeling shame in their identity following the survey, suggesting an overall positive emotional experience.

Discussion

The thematic findings from this photovoice study demonstrated how prevalent the holistic nature of identity is among individuals with minoritized identities. Participants

consistently depicted their identities not as isolated traits or categories (e.g., gender or ethnicity alone), but rather as interwoven and determined by community, relationships, cultural practices, and environmental influences. This is exemplified by the dominance of themes like Community, Nature, and Food, which often corresponded with cultural practices. The photo descriptions that accompanied these photos rarely made any mention of explicit cultural participation, highlighting how, for individuals in a context such as Hawai‘i, cultural participation and identity are simply seen as an integrated aspect of their daily lives. This concept, identity being experienced as a multifaceted whole rather than compartmentalized parts, aligns with developmental niche models (Harkness & Super, 1994), which emphasize how sociocultural environments are integral in shaping one's sense of self.

Social Cognition and Identity in Context

Within the multicultural and minoritized identity framework of this study, social cognition emerges as a dynamic process influenced by the blurred boundaries of group identification in Hawai‘i. Participants' photographs and descriptions revealed a tendency towards expansive ingroup perceptions, where community and relational ties extended beyond singular traits, potentially reducing reliance on stereotypical cues for social categorization. This supports the notion that holistic identity processing optimizes social cognitive mechanisms, such as ingroup inclusion and outgroup tolerance, by fostering flexible boundaries (Pauker et al., 2018). An example of this can be found in depictions of shared cultural artifacts like food or nature outings, which imply a cognitive shift toward broader, more welcoming definitions of belonging, which may mitigate the ‘double jeopardy’ effects of intersecting minoritized identities (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). This fluidity may impose additional cognitive demands as individuals navigate ambiguous group distinctions without clear markers. This could potentially heighten vigilance in social interactions, but given the positive emotional valence of the photos taken, it seems to align here in Hawai‘i with inclusion over searching for definitive belonging. This is heavily contrasted to mainland U.S. contexts, where rigid categorizations are most prominent (e.g., separate identity labels often determined by visual markers such as skin color), Hawai‘i's environment seems to cultivate a more inclusive social cognition, again evidenced by the participants’ positive emotional valence towards their identities post-study. This research supports the idea that in order to effectively study and understand the deeper underpinnings of social cognition, qualitative methodologies should be utilized (Larkin et al., 2011). While the present study was explorative, follow-up work can specify clearer empirical goals to investigate ingroup and outgroup boundaries further. Understanding social cognition as inherently embedded in cultural and relational contexts means it is imperative to include these factors in cognitive research. It can underscore the role of sociocultural niches

in modulating threat perception and bias expectations, offering implications for reducing intergroup prejudice in diverse societies through shared local experiences.

Implications

The themes observed in the present study contribute to the theoretical understanding of minoritized identity as a lived experience, with both positive and negative associations. The themes point to the overarching idea that people in Hawai'i tend to define their identities in a more holistic manner. Though, this can be contrasted by recognizing that having multiple social group memberships and viewing the self as "local" or distinct from a singular check-box listed ethnic background blurs the group distinction and may subsequently require more cognitive resources to identify which individuals are part of your ingroup since it can't rely on a distinctive or representative trait, even if that trait can itself be broad and insufficient for identity verification (e.g., skin color, a Pride pin). While these broader implications are based on thematic observations and existing literature, this photovoice study bolsters external and ecological validity of the perceptual fluidity of ingroup/outgroup boundaries due to cultural background. The findings could be used to inform diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, such as facilitating shared experiences over trait- or identity-based connections. The success of studying minoritized identity expression through photovoice will be critical to innovate future methodological designs, particularly qualitative and participant-guided methods, used in identity research. Photovoice can offer a highly engaging method that can capture behavioral and first-personal psychological insights at a low cost to researchers and laboratories. Cognitive scientists should take these findings as considerations as qualitative methods can offer differential insights to supplement field-specific theoretical support and further development, how cultural context may influence cognitive processes, and the methodological contribution of photovoice for participant and community engagement.

Limitations and Future Studies

College-aged students (18 to 25 years of age) are still considered to be emerging adults in terms of age and culturally bound social roles, and their psychosocial identities are not entirely developed (see Arnett, 2000). The sample, recruited primarily through undergraduate university courses, may not provide a fully developed perspective of the everyday lived experiences of minoritized individuals. Similarly, there was a gender imbalance; a larger male sample is needed to explore any gender-based similarities or differences in the findings. Attrition of participants and photos taken throughout the two-week period is a limitation due to the extended nature of data collection, however, most participants remained enthusiastic and data collection did not taper off throughout the two weeks to any detected significance. Many had not handled a digital camera before, but pointing out where the on/off

button was sufficient to gain familiarity. Future studies using photovoice should intentionally combat potential attrition in photos or participants by sending reminders or scheduling a check-in midway through the study. Based on available resources, mobile phones could be a methodological parallel to digital cameras, though with recognition of possible photo editing.

In terms of generalizability, the study took place in Hawai'i. The location, diversity, and social norms actively influenced the findings, as desired. It offered a unique perspective because of the ethnically diverse nature of the population, but the findings naturally may not generalize to minoritized individuals living outside of this particular sociocultural environment. The present study did not aim to be generalizable to all individuals with a minoritized identity regardless of cultural contexts, but it does hope to provide findings that can resonate with others outside of Hawai'i. Particularly, as holistic representations of identity were striking, this should be readily explored across other mono- and multi-cultural populations to understand if the local Hawai'i culture was the primary influence on broader conceptions of the self, or if it was the presence of so many categorical identities in this environment, or if individuals do readily have a holistic self-concept when *not* prompted to take pictures related to a singular categorical identity.

Future studies utilizing a photovoice method could place a larger emphasis on understanding social cognitive processes with more specific prompts to take pictures for a narrower research question (e.g., barriers to inclusion; those you consider your ingroup; physical representations of identity conflict). Specific questions during pre- or post-study surveys can aid in drawing conclusions between the photographs and how the data collection process affected participants' perception and experiences, too. As the photo descriptions were essential, other qualitative (interview) data would be helpful in drawing thematic conclusions. Additionally, more specific guidelines can be given for photo descriptions and/or participants can answer specific questions in their descriptions, which may yield more insight into the participants' cognitive processes. Follow-up studies by the research team expanded the data to include art, capturing higher emotionally valenced expressions of identity. Focus groups were used in combination with descriptions (of each individual piece), allowing deeper exploration into social cognitive processes activated when expressing one's minoritized identity.

Conclusion

Overall, holistic representations of identity were the most overarching prominent and unexpected finding. Beyond that, the themes of Community, Nature, and Food emerged most frequently, as expected. This reflects the embedded nature of identity, specifically within this Hawai'i context. The photovoice method was an engaging way to preliminarily investigate elements of social cognition in relation to first-person perspectives of minoritized identity and offers a promising avenue for future research.

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