

Sororities as Empowering Social Space:
Challenging Existing Discourses

By
Amanda Young

A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons.)

April, 2015, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Approved: Dr. Madine VanderPlaat, Supervisor

Date: April 29, 2015

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Abstract

The literature on sororities and sorority involvement is fairly sparse and the majority of it is negative in nature. Through an examination of literature, and interviews with a two key informants, mixed with the addition of autoethnographic research, this study seeks to answer the question: do sororities have the potential to be an empowering social space? While the literature review focused on all the many negative dimensions of sorority involvement, the interviews with the key informants and the autoethnographical experience of the researcher provide evidence that sororities are an empowering space for young women and that they have the potential to act as an access route to the public sphere.

April 29, 2015

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to the many people who helped to bring this research project together. First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Madine VanderPlaat for being the most amazing supervisor I could have ever hoped for and for providing me with all the valuable guidance and support to get me through this project - I honestly could not have done it without her. I am so deeply grateful for all her help throughout this project, and over the past year.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for all their love and support throughout this long process, it was not always the easiest and there were definitely some stressful moments but it got me through to the end. Also thanks to all my wonderful friends and peers who reviewed my work tirelessly.

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Introduction

The literature on sororities and sorority involvement or membership is fairly sparse and the fact that the majority of it is negative presents an issue that needs to be addressed. The current state of knowledge on sororities is one that is lacking diversity of research in terms of topics being researched among sororities as well as the methods used to draw conclusions regarding sororities and sorority involvement. The serious weakness found among current knowledge and research is the fact that it is one sided when it comes to sororities. Through an examination of literature, and interviews with a two key informants, mixed with the addition of autoethnographic research, this study seeks to answer the following question: do sororities have the potential to be an empowering social space?

In effort to answer the aforementioned question, this paper will begin with a literature review that consists of the background information on sororities, including where they originated, and their main purpose at that time. It will then go on to do a review of current academic literature regarding sororities as well as the various aspects of sorority membership including symbols and rituals associated with sororities, and the idea of sisterhood. In order to be able to discuss the idea of sororities as being an empowering social and public space, there will be a brief engagement with the literature on of the public sphere. The next portion of the study will consist of a methodology section that outlines the various methods used including autoethnography, interviews, and the literature review as well as the purpose and benefits of each. This section will also include the questions asked of the key informants by myself.

The data section will begin with a literature review of academic articles, and highlight the various themes that are found in the literature. The next section will focus on the responses from the interviews. This section will highlight the main points made by the key informants about their experiences in a sorority. Finally in the autoethnography portion I will switch over to a

story-telling mode and speak about my own experiences while weaving in the data from the literature review and the interviews. By touching on claims made in the literature review and the interviews, I will be able to include my thoughts and experiences to either validate the claims or to challenge them. Each section will thus contribute to a conclusion regarding whether sororities can be thought of as an empowering social space and potential access route to the public sphere.

Literature Review – Background on Greek Life

To grasp a better understanding of how Greek organizations work, it is beneficial to understand how fraternities and sororities started and how and why they have evolved over time. In the United States, fraternities in colleges date back to the 1770s but did not actually become fully established until the 1820s. Many of these organizations were influenced by patterns that were previously set by Freemasonry – a fraternal organization that traces its origins to the local fraternities of stonemasons (Wikipedia, 2015). The main difference between the European fraternities versus those in North America is that the North American organizations almost always “include initiations, the formal use of symbolism, and a lodge-based organizational structure (chapters)” (Wikipedia, 2015). It has been suggested that, “The very first college fraternity began when a small group of five young men attending William and Mary College in Virginia gathered on December 5th, 1776, to establish a student organization” (Torbenson & Parks, 2009).

These five young men designed and created a square silver medal on which they engraved three Greek initials; Phi Beta Kappa which then became the first Greek-letter fraternity in the United States. It is important to note that while there are multiple professional, recognition, and honour societies that use Greek letters, the type of Greek organizations being discussed in this study are social fraternities of which there are more than three hundred and fifty national

fraternity and sorority organizations (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). At the beginning of Phi Beta Kappa's creation, they were similar to other organizations on campus as their main function was as a literary society, the fraternity would sponsor essay writing and debates. Eventually, the organizations departed from the norm and oriented themselves more towards social activities.

While the fraternities and sororities across North America share much in common, there are also distinct differences. Some are more conservative in their policies while others are more progressive in what they are trying to achieve or what their beliefs are. Some Greek-letter organizations (GLOs) establish different chapters of their organizations at different colleges and universities, while others are based on more concrete ideals surrounding particular religious, racial, or ethnic groups. Some of these organizations maintain a small regional presence, while others may have a national presence, or even an international presence. The original Greek-letter organizations including sororities were dominated mostly by white, upper class, and Protestant students (Torbenson & Parks, 2009).

Fraternity members also started to include some secretive aspects to their group such as a handshake, motto, sign, and password as ways to identify who belonged (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Members of Phi Beta Kappa were enthusiastic about creating additional chapters of their group at other colleges and universities, in an effort to spread the brotherhood further into other communities. The process entailed the original "mother" chapter granting a charter to an individual who wished to establish a new chapter of the organization at another institution. The charter would be written on a piece of paper, torn in half, and the founding chapter would keep half while the new chapter kept the other half – this charter could be withdrawn if the new chapter did not uphold the ideals or was seen to be unworthy. Within four years, Phi Beta Kappa expanded to be in over twenty colleges (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Although many of the

traditions are carried forward, there were new traditions created within each of the chapters as well; therefore while they each maintain a level of continuity among the chapters, they have their own individuality as well – making each chapter unique.

The first sorority or women's fraternity was associated with co-educational college campuses in the Midwest and Southern regions. Like their male counterparts, they were composed by primarily white Protestant women. It is also important to note that like the fraternities, women in sororities were of high social status as well; it did not occur that someone who did not meet the organization's individually-set set of standards would be allowed to join a sorority. At this time women attending college were in a minority, which is why they organized and united their small numbers to give them a stronger position and presence on campus and in campus activities (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Until the 1830s, there were very few women who attended these male-dominated colleges and for the most part, membership was not an option – although there are some records of females joining male fraternities. The first women's organization was established at the first women's college – Wesleyan in 1851 where Pi Beta Phi was founded and is recognized as the first international women's fraternity (Torbenson & Parks, 2009).

Many individuals believe that the difference between sororities and fraternities is that sororities are for females and fraternities are for males, however this is not the case. The distinction between the two has to do with the origin of the words, sorority (soror) comes from a Latin origin meaning sister, while fraternity (frater) comes from Greek origin meaning brother. However due to the fact that some female organizations were created before the difference in terminology was created, they continue to fall under the old definitions. An organization's letters would correspond with one or the other based on the background of the organization – this is

why there is such a thing as women's fraternities. There are female organizations whose letters have a Greek origin which is why they are considered fraternities. There are also different types of Greek-letter organizations, most are academic and social fraternities and sororities, which consist of a majority of undergraduate students. There are professional fraternities and sororities that tend to align themselves with a particular field such as engineering, sciences, or fine arts. There are honour fraternities and sororities which are reserved for those of high academic achievement, often those who are part of the top 10% of their class. Finally there are also service fraternities or sororities whose main purpose is to serve within community projects (Torbenson & Parks, 2009).

Since the first fraternities and sororities were founded, there has been quite an expansion in the types and chapters of the organizations. It is now estimated that there are over 365 national fraternities and sororities that have been established since 1776 (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). There is not much to be found regarding Canadian data on fraternities and sororities, likely due to the popularity of them in the United States. They are much more present in college and university structure, some schools have a designated street just for Greek housing, and thus are easier to use when gathering data. The first organizations to open chapters in Canada did so at the University of Toronto, then McGill University. In 1942 there were 42 different chapters at University of Toronto, and 23 at McGill University (Wikipedia, 2015). These organizations work separately and together to make their communities a better place for everyone. Whether they are raising money for a local charity or volunteering their time at a shelter, they want to make a difference while also maintaining good grades while they are attending post-secondary education. The main purpose for a vast majority of Greek-letter organizations is to help members with personal growth, but also in other aspects of life as well. Being part of such an organization

also means having connections for the remainder of life, the connections can be for friendship reasons, or can also be used for networking and employment options (National Panhellenic Conference).

The National Panhellenic Conference is the premier advocacy and support organization for the advancement of the sorority experience. It also provides guidance and support for its inter/national sororities and women's fraternities and serves as the national voice on contemporary issues of sorority life. "Founded in 1902, NPC is one of the oldest and largest women's membership organizations representing more than 4 million women at 655 college/university campuses and 4,500 local alumnae chapters in the U.S. and Canada. Each year, NPC-affiliated collegians and alumnae donate more than \$5 million to worthy causes, provide \$2.8 million in scholarships to women and volunteer 500,000 hours in their communities" (National Panhellenic Conference).

Historically there have also been black fraternal organizations present as well whose members included Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. The first successful African American collegiate fraternity was at Cornell University in 1906 even though they operated as a social study club in the year previous to their official start date. Black fraternities and sororities were based on existing Greek-letter organizations with the exception that they had cultural additions such as calls, open hand signs, and step shows. Interestingly, although these organizations were social in nature, they were formed with an emphasis on public service and civil rights. It has also been acknowledged that Black students at many of the nation's larger institutions of higher education have long felt the need for "some kind of organization to protect their interests, and to afford some systematic means of providing wholesome recreation and social pleasures" (Kimbrough, 1995). In present day, these culturally emphasized fraternities and sororities are a bit more silent

than the rest. A possible explanation for this may be due to the history of fraternities and sororities only accepting white males/females and blocking out all others, these quieter organizations are still keeping to themselves and staying strong as a group to deal with the public service and civil rights issues they had originally came together to combat.

Rituals & Symbols

Due to the secretive nature of fraternities and sororities, there are often secret rituals and symbols involved. These rituals and symbols vary from mascots, handshakes, colours, gems, flowers, pins or badges, and songs, among others – they are part of the symbolic traditions of each organization (Torbenon & Parks, 2009). An example of a secretive topic among a Greek-letter organization would be something symbolic such as their handshake, knock on the door, or the true meaning of their crest. The reason why these are kept secret is to maintain the tradition that was created years before, and to ensure other organizations did not try to copy the secretive symbol, but most importantly to inspire loyalty among the members.. One of the most sacred traditions for each fraternity or sorority would be the initiation ceremony which each new member must go through. The initiation ceremony is most often a set of vows made to the organization, promising not to put the organization in jeopardy in any way and promising to represent them to the best of one's ability. A large part of every chapter within each fraternity or sorority are the meetings held with active members, these are generally kept private as they often address secretive topics which are not to be discussed with those outside of the organization – this is another example of the insider versus outsider dichotomy. An example of these secretive topics could be related to upcoming events, tradition-based things such as the handshake or meeting rituals, or simply details that are private to that specific organization.

Pins or badges are one of the most precious of the tangible items a member has to demonstrate their membership in the organization. Receiving the pin or badge is a symbol of membership. For many organizations, it is to be worn only when in business attire to ensure they are being represented in a positive and respectful manner. Due to the fact that the pins and badges are for members only and are very precious pieces, the jewellers who make them have been licensed by varying fraternity and sorority headquarters and their leaders. Fraternities and sororities are often quite particular about how the pin or badge is used or worn. As an example, there are some organizations who maintain that once a member has passed, the pin or badge must be either buried with the member, passed on to a relative who is a potential legacy, or returned to the organization's headquarters. A legacy is considered a relative of the initiated member who is automatically given a bid to join the same fraternity or sorority.

When someone is involved with a sorority or fraternity, they can often be seen wearing the organization's letters as a way of representing the organization, for example when they are doing volunteer or charity work. It is often frowned upon when someone who is not a member is seen wearing the letters as well, these letters and what they represent are sacred and unless the meanings are well understood, they should not be presented on someone's attire. Due to the beliefs and values of a particular organization, it is also possible that the organization's letters are prohibited from being worn when around alcohol as a way to avoid the risk of associating of the organization with risky behaviour. The way Greek-letter organizations are represented in society is very important to the members, which is why they are incredibly protective about who they grant membership to.

The process of joining a Greek-letter organization varies from one organization to the next. Each chapter has their own set of recruitment events that are used to collect background

information about those who are interested in joining their organization. It is also used as a way of helping those who are interested to learn more about the organization in order to make their decision on whether that particular organization is the best fit for them. Many female organizations are governed by the umbrella National Panhellenic Conference, and they often all start their recruitment during the same time (National Panhellenic Conference). There are usually around four events during recruitment that each organization coordinates that often have a guiding factor or theme; this could be one of their main purposes or pillars such as volunteering or scholarship work.

During this time when the active members are learning about those who are interested in potentially joining their organization, they often want to hear about what they are working towards in school, their past experiences, and their grades among others. Once the recruitment process is over, the organization makes the decision as to who they would like to offer a bid to, these are a type of invitation to join. Once a bid has been received, that person has the ability to accept or decline, and based on this decision will then begin the process leading to their pledge to the fraternity or sorority. By the end of the pledge process, said person will ultimately end up at the initiation into the organization – this is where they learn many of the secrets of the organization and they also make their vow to the organization. While each Greek-letter organization has its own beliefs, values, and purposes regardless of whether they are male or female, there is a valuable and precious bond that is formed within the male organizations – a brotherhood, and within the female organizations – a sisterhood.

Sisterhood

“On January 27th, 1870, four women at the Ashbury College in Greencastle, Indiana, gathered together in a darkened room and initiated themselves into a secret society. Pledging lifelong vows of loyalty to one another and swearing to uphold a set of carefully outlined ideals, these four students conceived of and established Kappa Alpha Theta, the first Greek-letter women’s fraternity” (Turk, 2004, p. 13). Two of the first four women to attend this college as well as two others believed it was important that women felt they had a valuable place on campus, and to ensure they had a safe space filled with supportive women, they created the fraternity. The process of trying to assert that they were of value to the campus was difficult, and trying to convince the current male-dominated fraternities that they were equal to them was also seen as an impossible feat.

In a time and space where women were not commonly enrolled in post-secondary education, it was difficult for them to speak about issues that they understood as important to them without worrying about backlash from others on campus. This group of women created a bond between them like that of biological sisters, a familial bond that could not be broken. They often found themselves shut out of many curricular and extracurricular activities at the college. These women of the first female fraternity considered themselves to be representatives of their sex and responsible for making a place for women on campus. Their goal was to “unite with other female collegians as in a closer bond of sisterhood than would be possible without the ties of a secret fraternity” (Turk, 2004, p. 22). The assumption being there would not be anyone else who could better understand and support the decisions these women were making better than other women in the same situation.

Based on the fact that sororities are formed and present in post-secondary educational institutions, it is often the case that scholarship and grades are one of the most important factors

when deciding who may gain membership and represent the organization. The Greek-letter organizations want to ensure they are represented by women of great intelligence and social class, as opposed to someone who was accepted into the school because of personal connections. When it comes time for these women to have to prove themselves to the campus community and broader community, it provides a great sense of relief for them knowing they are not alone and that they can rely on their sisters. These bonds created within the sororities and female fraternities are bonds that last forever, it is a chosen family figure. These unique relations carry between chapters, which can mean internationally as well (Turk, 2004).

Turk outlines one of her main points about sisterhood as “once a sister, always a sister” which is something powerful for women in a sorority or female fraternity (Turk, 2004). As previously mentioned, when joining such an organization it is a commitment for life. All those who pledged the same organization before, at the same time, and after will always be united in a special way. After collegiate years, alumnae are often still involved in varying aspects such as governing, training, and the overall management of the organization. The reasons why alumnae stay involved is due to a sense of loyalty, as well as a desire to contribute knowledge, wisdom, and guidance as was given to them while they were active members. In order to maintain these organizations for women to have a place in the public sphere, the aid and guidance from those before them is crucial.

Public vs. Private Sphere in Civil Society

When fraternities were created, one of the primary purposes for why they were established was to give a private space for topics to be discussed that were not seen to be acceptable by the broader community. “The word ‘public’ has long served as the placemaker for the political ideal of open, inclusive, and effective deliberation about matters of common and

critical concern” (Ryan, 1992, p. 259). Although public space was supposed to be there as a way to talk about these critical concerns for women it was a bit different as they were often restricted to the private sphere due to traditional gender norms surrounding labour. Women were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere, something that sociologist Habermas related back to the separate realm of the private sphere (Ryan, 1992).

Habermas believed the public sphere encouraged rational and democratic social interaction. He argued that there needs to be a set of individuals in charge that are not necessarily politically charged; which is linked with the reasoning as to why individuals began to push and challenge authorities and boundaries (Ryan, 1992). The public sphere was primarily constructed in the shadow of both gender restrictions and an emerging private sector of social life. For quite some time, women’s public presence was veiled and distorted by the manipulation of gender symbolism (Ryan, 1992). Women were supposed to be kept in the private sphere where the only opportunity they had to converse with other women about various ideas was during tea where they were often watched over by their husbands. Men had the opportunity to discuss their thoughts among themselves while at work, or at their designated social spaces; these spaces were also often reserved for those of higher status who could afford membership to these spaces.

Once women fought long and hard enough to gain access to the public sphere, they were able to come together to affect change in their community and in the broader society. Later in their fights for equality, these women eventually found multiple points of access to the public as they won state funds for private welfare schemes, lobbied for sex-specific interests, and prohibited state bureaucracies from trampling on the liberties of their sex. “By occupying these spaces, the women worked out of their political identities and enlarged the range of issues that weighted into the general interest of the public” (Ryan, 1992, p. 283). The various instances of

women's voices in the public sphere allows for a challenge to society to listen carefully and respectfully, a position that has long been absent from the formal public sphere and public discourse.

Once women were permitted or granted access to the public sphere, they were able to partake in a moral and intellectual rationale which led to the improvement of societies, reform movements, and other controversial topics such as abolition (Gould, 2008, p. 38). It is evident how this need for access to the public sphere was desired by women, in an effort to be able to communicate and bond with other women with similar passions and desires and thus affect change – often directed towards governmental organizations. Further in this study, the public sphere will be related to female fraternities and sororities to exemplify how those organizations can be considered a potential vehicle for the mobilization of women into the public sphere.

Methodology

This study will employ three methodological strategies. The methodological strategies are (1) a secondary qualitative analysis of current and previous literature in the area of GLOs, specifically sororities when possible. The reason for including a qualitative analysis of secondary data is to identify how sororities are perceived as a focus of academic inquiry. The research design being used is cross-sectional as it will review and analyze a large chunk of literature in the area of sororities and stereotypes associated with the subgroup. In effort to execute the research study in a meaningful and productive manner, it will be done by collecting a chosen group of literature, dividing the articles up based on themes, and then analyzing each theme individually. Once each theme has been thoroughly analyzed, I will then group them back together in terms of positive aspects within sorority involvement and negative aspects within sorority involvement.

The second form of data collection (2) will be some primary research in the form of interviews. Interviewing two sorority sisters will provide me with experiential data that I can compare to the thematic data resulting from the literature review. Questions to be asked include:

- Reasons for joining a sorority
- Perceived benefits of sorority membership
- Level of satisfaction with participation
- Reflections on public representations of sorority life (media/films)

The third and most important research strategy will be an autoethnography based on my own experiences of being a member of a sorority. I will compare my own experiences and opinions with the key themes illustrated in the literature and the experiences of the sorority sisters. This will allow for reflexive thought and another real-life experience to be included. An autoethnographic approach is argued to be the most appropriate methodology for providing readers with an insiders point of view. Ellis defines autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematic ally analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Ellis continues by enforcing the idea that autoethnographers recognize the multiple ways in which personal experience influences the research process as well as the quality and reliability of the data (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography is a method which acknowledges subjectivity, emotionality, and’s influence on the research, rather than hiding these matters of assuming they do not exist or are not present in the research process. What is unique about autoethnography as compared to other methodologies is that is combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography.

When writing an autobiography, the author retroactively and selectively writes about their past experiences as opposed to living through the experience for the sole purpose of writing a document about it; the stories of these experiences are assembled using hindsight (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Doing ethnographical research entails the study of a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping the insiders who could be considered cultural members, and outsiders who could be considered cultural strangers for a better understanding of the culture in question. A key aspect to writing an autoethnography is to look at the experiences being explained in an analytical manner, otherwise the writer is simply telling a story which is something anyone could do. By writing analytically, it allows for a deeper thought process and also encourages the creation of meaning through a reflexive process.

Based on the emotional connection that can be present for those with involvement in sorority life, autoethnography is also an advantageous method to use as it can make the text evocative through the use of personal and descriptive text that not all research methods are able to do. The main goal of using autoethnography for this research is to produce aesthetic and evocative descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences with sorority life. This method not only attempts to make personal experiences meaningful and engaging, but also to allow readers to grasp a thicker and more rigid understanding of the experiences of those involved with sororities. Different research methods each have their own benefits and autoethnography is not any different. As previously mentioned as part of the research, there will be a comparison and contrast of personal experiences against current research regarding sorority membership. In ethnographic research, there are evidently questions on the reliability of my memory, as well as

questions on the validity of my experience in that it invokes in readers a feeling that the experience I describe is lifelike and could be represented as true.

By the author including their own experiences there will be a fresh, new sense of validity present that will enable the reader to see the experience from a new point of view and allow them to engage in the feelings felt by the author in specific moments based on the descriptive discourse used. The reason this approach is best is due to the engaging notion of the analysis. The way in which the research is conducted while including own personal experiences, it will allow the readers to place themselves in the situations in question. It may often appear as though when reading about a study done with participants, it feels as though the reader is watching a movie or a play; however, when reading an autoethnography-type research, the experience for the reader will be more similar to that of reading a diary where they will be able to place themselves in the author's shoes. Given the focus, it is evident that these are the best choices in going about the research as it allows the to include information that can add to both the validity and value of the research.

An important part of conducting autoethnography is when dealing with notions of reliability, generalizability, and validity. One of the main points of conducting autoethnographic research is the value placed on the narrative truth presented to myself based on what a story of experience does, how it is used, understood, and responded to. It is pertinent to remember that memory is fallible and that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). For the purpose of this study as well as many autoethnographic studies, the question of reliability often refers to the participant or narrator's credibility. As an example, in this study I would chose to interview participants who have had a longer membership with a sorority as opposed to someone

who does not for the sake of continuous experiences and more knowledge and experience about the organization as a whole – this train of thought was employed in this study.

For a researcher conducting an autoethnography, validity evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is believable and that this feeling could be true. Researchers and authors of this type of study want to ensure their data sounds like a story being told by the one who had the experience. One issue that arises quite often is that of generalizability, not only in most autoethnographies as a whole, but also in Greek life. There is a major concern that if one person has an experience and tells their story, that the listener (often an outsider) will then make the generalization that everyone in a sorority or fraternity will also have that same experience, which is often not the case. Interestingly in the case of autoethnographies, the generalizability is often left in the hands of the reader as it is up to them to figure out if what they are reading resembles other stories they may have heard (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Data Collection

Data is collected and presented in this study from three different sources, academic literature, primary research interviews, and an autoethnography by myself. For the sake of the literature being used as data, there was an in-depth search of academic literature done on fraternities and sororities on Novanet, Google Scholar, the Saint Mary's University library, SocIndex, and JSTOR. The search was done in a fashion to search for very broad subtopics, there were not any distinct searches done based on race, ethnicity, class, or anything of the like. When doing searches on these databases, keywords used were those such as “fraternity”, “fraternit*”, “sorority”, “soror*”, “issues”, “aspects”, “positive”, and “experience”. Once there were several articles compiled, they were divided up based on their individual key themes that arose within them. Once they were all categorized using a source grid as a tool, it was evident

that there were some strong key themes among all the articles as a whole, therefore it was decided that these would be the founding tools for the questions asked in the interviews, and also the data with which the autoethnography portion of the study will engage.

For the interview portion of the data collection, the key informants were contacted via email. The two key informants were easily contacted and chosen due to the connection I have with Greek-letter organizations. There was not any strategy used in deciding who to interview, simply that one has been around the organization/structure for a while (20+ years), whereas one has only been involved for five to six years. The reason for this was to be able to see if there were any differences that were apparent between the two members, as well as to see if there had been any significant differences between them based on the age gap. The questions asked in the interviews were their reasons for joining a sorority, their perceived benefits of sorority membership before joining and since joining, their level of satisfaction with their participation with the sorority, and their reflections and/or opinions on the public representation of sorority life, both in the news media, and in films.

The third and final data collection method was the autoethnography portion where I was able to connect back to the academic literature and the interviews to create some potentially newer and deeper thought. Once the literature review was done and all themes were compiled, as well as the interviews conducted, I read through and re-listened to the recordings of the interviews to place themselves in a space where they could either relate, or be confused as to the others' experiences. Once read over and re-listened to a few times, I collected some key themes between both data sources and engaged with them using my own experiences and knowledge. This is considered to be another form of data as it presents a new and engaged understanding/outlook on the information presented throughout this study.

Data – Academic Literature Review

Literature Review

Among the academic literature review conducted there were four main themes that arose, and within each there were both negative and positive aspects for each respective theme. The four main themes that came up were (a) body image and surveillance, (b) academics and education within sorority membership as well as life skills in general, (c) drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity, and (d) gender attitudes and dominance. These themes will each be addressed individually, however it will also be made evident how each theme relates to one another. For the purpose of simplicity and organization, I will analyze these main themes in two parts; first I will analyze each theme as a negative concept or attribute to sorority membership, then I will proceed to do the same while analyzing each theme as a positive concept or attribute.

Negativity Among Sorority Membership

As previously mentioned, the majority of literature on sorority membership is highly negative, focusing on why sororities should not be allowed as they negatively impact the growth of a young woman. The first prominent theme among the literature was that of body image and surveillance. “It was the worst week many freshman girls experience...It was awkward, ego-crushing, and brought us to the depths of shallowness...The two minute convos are just a chance for as many girls to judge how pretty you are...” was the response to an open-ended survey question when asked for a general reflection on the rushing process (Rolnik, Engeln-Maddox, & Miller, 2010). Research pertaining to negative stereotypes towards sorority involvement or membership tends to focus on high rates of eating disorders due to pressures related to body image as well as surveillance (Rolnik, Engeln-Maddox, & Miller, 2010). Basow, Bookwala, and Foran found in their study that there was a high social pressure to conform to ‘thin’ ideals based

on the fact that sorority sisters and those who wanted to gain membership of a sorority were more likely to feel the pressure as compared to those with no interest in sorority membership (Basow, Bookwala, & Foran, 2007, p. 398). Based on the previously mentioned study, sorority members were therefore at a higher risk of developing eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Basow, et al., 2007, p.398). Being categorized as a 'sorority girl' can mean bring about descriptive words such as egotistical and shallow; however, it can also be linked to words such as beautiful, fun, and outgoing (Wade & Brewer, 2006, p. 758). When connecting body image and surveillance with sororities, the notion of education is important in understanding why body image issues are as prevalent as they are. Not only is education as the main purpose for being in school and part of a sorority, there are also those who blame sorority membership for low grades among young women who are affiliated with sororities in college and university.

The second prominent theme among the literature was attached to the broad topic of education. Sororities are attached to the idea of postsecondary school due to the fact that you must be a full-time student in order to be eligible for membership. There are studies which attempt to prove this notion that those involved with sororities have significantly lower grades as compared to those who are not involved with sororities. Basow et al.'s study reported that based on the fact that the girls were side-tracked with issues surrounding body image, they struggled with their academics (Basow, 2007, p. 397). The same study also examined the issue of education from a nutrition perspective, stating that due to the girls' worries about body image, they were not eating properly/nutritiously and therefore their motivation to go to class and pay attention also diminished (Basow et al., 2007, p. 397). In terms of learning, Whipple and Sullivan (1998) enforce the idea that sorority members cannot be effective learners until they learn to deal with the alcohol problems of which they are stereotyped to have (Whipple &

Sullivan, 1998, p.90). The literature in this area not only focuses on potential educational struggles, but also on where the blame lies in connection to other negative aspects; the interaction with drugs and alcohol. Throughout the body of literature there is a large amount of articles relating to the negative effects sorority membership has on learning and academics; however, there are also a few articles which prove there are positive effects as well that can outweigh the negatives, these will be discussed further on.

The third prominent theme among the examined literature is a theme of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity; authors Whipple & Sullivan argue “alcohol abuse is the greatest challenge of this culture” (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998, p. 88). Minow and Einolf (2009) found that sorority members are a higher risk of sexual assault than non-sorority members due to more participation in social events involving alcohol (Minow & Einolf, 2009, p. 840). Often times there can be a correlation between heavy drinking and ‘high risk’ sexual activity and some studies report that those who participate in sorority life are at a higher risk of dating more aggressive males. (Anderson & Danis, 2007, p. 92). An interesting study found that students who were already heavy drinkers before coming to college and then made their decision on which Greek organization they wished to join based on who was better known on campus for ‘partying’; this unfortunately increased their heavy drinking (McCabe, Schlenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Kloska, 2005, p. 515). This presents a negative proponent due to worsening the students’ drinking habits, although it does not mean Greek membership caused the primary drinking choices. Some may suggest that alcohol and drug use can be related to social interactions, which in turn supports a space where gender attitudes and issues of gender dominance are present.

The fourth and final prominent theme found among the literature is that of gender attitudes and gender dominance. The ‘rush’ process where potential new members go through the motions of joining a new Greek Letter Organization, often through attendance of various events. Rolnik’s study reported that during the ‘rush’ process, potential new members felt dominated by current members (Rolnik et al., 2010, p. 12). Another study reported that affiliation with GLOs is often associated with “traditional male dominant-female submissive attitudes” however they could not explain where these predispositions come from (Kalof & Cargill, 1991, p. 423). Based on sexualized performance among students, men’s accounts of women’s sexual behaviour in the party scene are deeply ambivalent – what Sweeney (2014) calls “slut stigma” (Sweeney, 2014, 381). In a study produced on experiences of and feelings about rape among GLOs, authors found that due to fraternity (or sorority) practices and norms, especially in loyalty, group protection and secrecy, and alcohol, it creates an atmosphere of rape (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991, p. 38).

Positivity Among Sorority Membership

Although there is an overwhelming amount of studies done on the negative aspects of sorority membership, there are also studies that show positive aspects as well, some that offset the previously discussed negative aspects. As a rebuttal against the overrepresentation of negative aspects in terms of body image and surveillance, one study reported the sororities often have guest speakers about eating disorders and similar issues (Anderson & Danis, 2007, p. 89). By having health experts as well as motivational speakers come talk with the sorority girls, they become more educated on the issues and thus are less likely to fall victim to them. Berbary (2014) speaks to the idea of what she calls ‘ladylikeness’ when examining hegemonic notions of femininity and ‘proper women’ as a way to resist stereotypes created by society (Berbary, 2014,

p. 951). Stereotypes are being enforced due to this way of thinking with hegemonic norms in mind when speaking about girls. Societal expectations of performance change over time yet expectations of how girls should present themselves have not changed at the same pace, it is because of this that stereotypes are as negative as they are towards all females, especially those with sorority membership. The most productive way to engage with these stereotypes and combat them is through the use of education as a weapon of sorts; by producing highly educated young women with sorority membership, as well as educating society as a whole about sororities and the benefits associated with them.

Although the majority of the literature and studies in the area of education/academics and sororities appear to focus on the negative aspects such as lower grades as compared to non-sorority girls, there are some strong positive effects associated with sorority membership. Thompson, Oberle, and Lilley (2011) did a study to determine whether students affiliated with ‘Greek organizations’ were more academically advanced, their study reported a greater level of self-efficacy in ‘Greek students’ versus ‘non-Greek students’ (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 751). The same article also claimed that being affiliated with ‘Greek organizations’ positively correlated with both effort to learn information and effort to do well on the testing of their knowledge (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 152). Part of having membership in a sorority or fraternity often involves an expected level of academics – usually a minimum grade point average. Those who are associated with ‘Greek letter organizations’ are sometimes categorized with those on sports teams or clubs as it is often seen as an ‘extracurricular activity’, for similar reason, being involved with GLOs does not negatively impact their ability to think critically (Martin, Hevel, & Pascarella, 2011, p. 545). Hebert (2006) reported that through membership with a fraternity (or sorority), the students’ academic talents were nurtured within a culture of intelligent and well-

rounded individuals who respected academic achievement (Hebert, 2006, p. 32). As previously discussed, education and more general knowledge on the benefits with sorority involvement is lacking, which could potentially explain the high levels of negativity associated with drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity among sorority girls.

There was not much literature presented in terms of positives for sororities in the way of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. Although Minow and Einolf present the claim, based on their previous research, that sorority members are at a higher risk of sexual assault, they also found that having membership with a sorority could also be seen as a protective factor (Minow & Einolf, 2009, p. 849). In terms of attendance to social events, sorority members can be protective factors as they look out for their sisters to ensure all who are present are safe. An interesting perspective is that of Sweeney (2014) who uses the symbolic interactionist approach which looks at the dilemmas caused by intersections such as masculinity (or femininity) and collegiate sexuality and the strategies by which they resolve them (Sweeney, 2014, p. 378). These social interactions are what aid in sharing knowledge, both about sorority life and life in general.

Although a study showed barriers of silence were being created and therefore preventing girls from sharing stories, whether positive or negative, having the feeling of sisterhood is crucial to ensure a safe space free from judgement (Anderson & Danis, 2007, p. 94). Kalof & Cargill's study also mentioned that independent females were less likely to ascribe to the traditional gender stereotypes, this would explain how issue-specific education can be really beneficial to the members of the sororities (Kalof & Cargill, 1991, p. 420). Berbary's research proved that discourse would set boundaries which allowed girls to be positive in effort to battle these stereotypes; there was a strong resistance against societal stereotypes held against GLOs due to societal beliefs (Berbary, 2014, p. 962).

Further throughout the research were studies such as that of Hebert, which focused on the bonds created among fraternities (or sororities), and how the relationships among brothers (or sisters) allowed them to focus in school with the help of a good support system (Hebert, 2006, p. 37). By having a positive support system it allowed GLO members to also have a significant resource in terms of academic help or life advice; this removed the dominance feeling among and within the GLO members. Using the bystander approach to sexual and intimate violence prevention was effective at changing attitudes among incoming members of sorority chapters on campus (Moynihan, Banyard, Arnold, Eckstein, & Stapleton, 2011, p.11). This further proves that having the feeling of family among GLOs is important to maintain solidarity. Another study reported that for many members they seek out sororities as an alternative family structure because they see these organizations as away to find a place to belong; a more intimate group within a large student body on campus (Reno, McNamee, & Baylor, 2011, p.1).

Data – Interviews

Interviews were conducted with two women who are part of a female fraternity; one woman is an active collegiate member, while the other has been an active alumna for a while but is still very much involved in the organization. For the purpose of this study, these women will be referred to as key informants A and B.

Question 1: Reasons for joining a sorority

The first question or topic asked of the key informants was with regards to their reasons for joining the organization. Both of the key informants had fairly similar answers as to why they decided to join the organization. Both women mentioned that they were unsure at the beginning. Key Informant A stated “I am from a small town (in another province) and used to having a lot of people supporting me, and I was really nervous about coming into a new space and not

knowing anyone. I lived in (a specific residence) and the Residence Assistant was currently involved in this certain organization, and she suggested that I come out”. She then went on to describe how she had gone to one event but that she was not sure if it was for her. Interestingly, she also mentioned that she had gone through some formal recruitment events for another organization as well, but she was still unsure. Further in the semester some students in her current organization suggested she partake in open recruitment, this is when the person who is interested in joining goes for coffee and such with a group of the collegiate girls as an informal way of getting to know them and the organization.

Key Informant A said, “I was really blown away by the girls who had come to the open recruitment events to meet me, they were really great girls. They were women who were really put together which was a bit intimidating, but they were super confident, and I want to be like this in a few years so I decided to join”. She spoke about how she did not only meet people in her own organization, but in the other Greek-letter organizations as well. A key point that she made about connections among the organization was when she spoke about a close friend she made within the group of women. She mentioned she would go home to her house over holidays and such because it was much closer than going home, and said “how often do you really get to meet such special people”. Another awesome point she made was that for most university students, they only really make friends with others in the same faculty, compared to being in an organization like hers, it has allowed her to become friends with people from various faculties. When discussing the alumnae, she talked about how “it is really special because even though they initiated so long ago, they all still went through the same things and know all the same rituals, but also have gone through heartbreak and fights with friends, so they can understand”.

She finished this question by saying “I was just really looking for that sense of community, which I feel like I got”.

For the first question of Key Informant B, her answer was quite similar in that she was a bit hesitant at first due to her knowledge about Greek-letter organizations at the time. She spoke about how she worked in the student union building at the university and many of her co-workers were in Greek-letter organizations. She said many of them “skipped class and wrote Greek letters on their notebooks and I thought ‘you know what, not for me’, then I went to a frat party and it was a bunch of drinking and it just wasn’t my scene, it was what you saw in the movies”. She said a couple of her friends at work said “you have to come out, just come to one recruitment event” although she was quite reluctant and said it just was not for her, they told her “how can you know unless you come and check it out for yourself”. After a lot of prodding she went to an event at which point she said she “fell in love with the girls and the feeling of community and support that they had, I was hooked!”. She said they gave her the recruitment schedule and then delivered her bid to her dorm room, and she was “super excited”. She mentioned her grades were too low to join but they took a chance on her and put her on the scholarship program, telling her she had to achieve a certain GPA by initiation time which was conveniently the same GPA she needed to graduate (this was her final year).

Had she not been initiated into the organization, she may not have graduated on time as it gave her the structure she needed to reach her goals. She mentioned “what is nice is that you get recognition for all your hard work which you might not get somewhere else”. She said being part of the organization, she was given different study tools for different exam types, and how to write a paper, this organizations has “tons of sisters who edit papers for others and help give you the motivation to get you through the tough times, which you often need. Also, time management

is something that not many people are good with, and those skills are taught to you in a supportive environment”. She makes the point that the fraternity “does want to prepare future leaders”. She talked a lot about her advising roles, and teaching fraternity education, which was difficult for her because she had a fear of public speaking. By being guided and mentored through the process she was given the skills and confidence to be able to feel comfortable talking in front of groups. She said, “even as an alumnae, my skills are still expanding and that’s the cool thing, it continues even after you graduate”.

Question 2: Perceived benefits of sorority membership

I asked the question as to how they anticipated what the benefits of membership would be before they joined versus now and reflecting on the experience. Key Informant A started her response by saying “So I grew up watching Sydney White (the movie) and Legally Blonde (the movie) and all those movies and it all seemed so ridiculous but exciting, there is some kind of allure to that”. She went on to say that before joining she had gone onto the different webpages and Facebook pages and looked at the photos and they all seemed “so happy, and smiling, and for initiation they are all dressed the same, which gives the impression that you would have a group of people who would be there no matter what”. Next she mentioned how she thought there would be a lot of partying which is something she was not looking for, but it is something people think about because of movies and therefore that is the stereotype that every one has. I re-asked the question to remind the participant what the question was and she said, “Yeah, they’ve definitely surpassed all my expectations”.

The topic of mandatory weekly meetings came up and she mentioned how “It does push you to do better, with schooling and the way you present yourself, people knew I was (in this organization) which was special to me so I wanted to represent them properly”. She mentioned

how she had negative experiences with people “turning their nose down” when they found out she was involved in a Greek-letter organization even though these people knew nothing about it which she said was “really frustrating for me”. She said how she would reply to these people by saying “I’ve been in this for four years and you have no idea what you’re talking about” and that her organization is one of the main reasons she is still at the university she is at. Key Informant A talked about how before someone joins an organization like hers, people do not think about the positions that are available, and there is help with studying if it is needed. Next topic was the notion of dues and how “it is a big financial commitment but you aren’t expected to walk in and drop all your dues on the table, there are things put in place to so you can pay over time”.

For Key Informant B, she said, “personal growth is a huge benefit because we provide a safe space and the mentoring to allow people to develop skills. We create opportunities for them, for example some people want to volunteer their time to charities but don’t know how to get started...this organization can set that up so all you do is show up and experience it, sometimes that really helps to narrow people’s scope a little bit to figure out where their passions are”. She went on to say scholarship was “a huge one” as well, and that “their founding pillars are three big ones...community involvement, and connections and growth with other people”. In terms of internal rewards, she mentioned “girls have applied for scholarships and received X amount of dollars from the foundation towards their education”.

Key Informant B made an interesting observation about how their traditions have remained the same over time, but as things such as technology changes, the organization has to change and adapt. She gave the example of how when she initiated so many years ago, there was no such thing as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or even texting and now with these new social media platforms, there has to be training in place to ensure the organization is presented well on

these platforms. She made the point that “social media has created the opportunity for misunderstanding and for putting things out there that you don’t realize has an impact on others, and the responsibility on our members has been a lot”.

Question 3: Level of satisfaction with participation

With the level of satisfaction in terms of connections, Key Informant A mentioned she got her job because of someone she knew through the organization, she also did a peace-keeping trip with a couple women from the same organization. As far as future aspects, she spoke about the alumnae as “really put together women that all have careers but also all have families, and it would be very rare to hear of a member from her organization not going somewhere after their education”. She mentioned how all the alumnae are also “very proud to be part of this particular organization and how that is very special”. She went on about the positions she held within the organization with philanthropy, member development, and an individual level coordinator which she says “helped her to be accountable, and allowed her to show others how much the organization meant to her and wanted to make it as special for new members throughout their initiation”. In one of her positions she held workshops about various things, “I did one on positive body image, and I did one on healthy relationships, and I did one on being conscious about sexual health which is something I wouldn’t normally talk to people about so I got a professional on campus to help with that. I just have so many connections on campus”.

The participant and I spoke about the commonalities between her and the other women in her organization and she said “as cliché as it sounds, when you’re sitting in that room with all the other women, you are with a bunch of people with the same values, it obviously changes from person to person, but at the core, it’s the same”. She talked about being organized because there is always a lot on the go between school and the organization; she mentioned how she would live

by her calendar because it kept her on track with everything – something she learned to handle through the organization, which will carry on with her throughout her life. She went back to the idea of perceptions and mentioned how “I would go to the library and would wear my letters and it shows people that I care about my education, and it shows people that the stereotypical perceptions they have could very well be false”. She continued by saying, “people see the Greek letters and roll their eyes thinking all we do is party, and that is not at all what we do”.

Key Informant A and I talked about connections further and she said “it sounds really cheesy, but there are like at least 40 people you can call at the drop of a hat and they will be there for you”. She said further on in the interview that “One girl looked at my today and said ‘I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you’, and that is super powerful, that’s huge!”. The participant and I collectively spoke about one of their sisters had passed away in the last year and how 10 girls flew to the funeral which was out of province, and there were even members of other Greek-letter organizations there as well as a support system. She said “its really special”. She talked about the organization’s foundation, the fact that they have GPA requirements, but that nobody writes about these things in the media because nobody would read about it, people prefer to read the “juicy or scandalous stuff”.

I asked Key Informant B about her satisfaction with the choice she made to join the organization, and her satisfaction with the organization over the years. She responded by saying how between the time she initiated and now there have been almost 230 new members initiated in around 15 years. She said, “I am so glad that I stuck around, and that I decided to come through because I almost didn’t initiate, I was feeling weird about it...and I’m so glad I did”. She was saying how she wanted to stay involved and she has been ever since, for about 20 years. She

went back to the idea of when she first joined and how now that time has passed, her family is not so foreign to it, and when she has meetings going on, they see the benefits.

Question 4: Reflections on public representations of sorority life (media/films)

Based on the fact that there are multiple films which include Greek-letter organizations and they are often in the news on television for numerous reasons, I wanted to get a sense of the participants thoughts on what is being portrayed in movies and how things are (re) presented in the news. Key informant A responded to this question by saying “I don’t think negatively we’re going to get anywhere if nobody talks about it, but I also think the media is really quick to think of Greek organization, lets just jump on this – which is an organization of students, we aren’t always going to make the right decisions just like any other group of people”. She interestingly makes a comparison between Canada and the United States by saying, “we are a very small university, we are a very small chapter, there are only a handful of Greek-letter organizations at our university, we are the only National Panhellenic Organization, so it is very different”.

She states that she believes there is “merit to watching those movies (House Bunny, Legally Blonde, Sydney White), I like those movies, they are genuinely funny movies, what they are portraying Greek life to be – No, but they do it because that is what will sell tickets”. She then got on the topic of hazing and said “the fact that people think we haze, we don’t haze, I was never hazed, I will never haze anyone, but this opens up discussion because people assume that is what initiation is about but if you give me five minutes of your time, I will tell you what our organization is about”. This participant went on to explain a few key parts in different movies where even though they are showing incorrect representations of what Greek-letter organizations are about, they still show the bonds that are created which are true. She said when considering this study, had I talked to people who were not members of this type of organization that people

“probably would’ve been really cold, and that there are insiders and outsiders, and we are insiders of a Greek community and everyone has a responsibility of educating people”.

She referred back to the hard work she has put into the organization and even though she was not doing it to be recognized, she has received plaques and awards for her hard work and that is something she will “always cherish, and it has really affected the person I am today”. She said that people often automatically think less of her because she is a woman in a Greek organization, which is “funny” as she called it because she just won a huge impact award at her school for the various things she has accomplished and participated in over the past year. She said when it comes to negative news attention; they often focus on groups such as sports teams or Greek organizations because it is an easy target. When it comes to the way outsiders judge these organizations, she said they need to “come to a recruitment event, come into a room with all these passionate women and tell me we just like to drink and party, you’ll realize quickly that it isn’t the case, I would recommend (the organization) to anyone. They say you get as much out of it as you put in, and I have put in a lot, but I have also gotten so much out of it. In terms of the television news and what is happening in the United States that it is “horrible”.

For Key Informant B, mentioned she had seen a few articles recently in the news about racist chants and said, “the thing with the media is you know, just like I tell the members, everything you post onto social media becomes public domain, even a private group on Facebook – someone will find it and gain access, it is not private when you put it on the internet regardless of the intention. It is hard lesson to keep everyone responsible of what they post”. When discussing another issue in the media, she mentioned she “often has a hard time commenting because we never really know the whole picture”. During a part where Key Informant B was talking about the media, she said, “they have to put that information out there

quickly and they don't always have the full story, sometimes they aren't entitled to the full story because sometimes there is information that is confidential. At the same time, there are some things that I don't agree with that organizations do, and we know they do – but are you in a position to comment on it?"

She said, "All you can do is try to change the public perception and realize and understand that not every organization is the same, and not to generalize. You need to hope that by setting a positive example, that you influence change in other organizations – you don't have to do it this way and can still be successful. We try to be role models for the other Greek-letter organizations". In terms of movies and such, she said, "it is so funny watching them, having joined an organization...you know its not reality". I mentioned how there is often good and bad in every one of these movies and spoke about a specific example. She said, "we are not perfect, our alcohol rules have changed, we used to be allowed to have alcohol at sisterhood retreats – we're changing with the times, it doesn't mean we don't ever drink, but we do it responsibly and with risk management in place, and we make sure members are safe and not drinking in excess, and there is no hazing".

"Sometimes a little bit of negative press is better than no press" was something she mentioned about the media when talking about how it happens all the time where people do not know the organizations exist here in Canada. She mentioned there is a public relations plan in place most of the time for most organizations. They use different strategies and techniques to ensure they are visible in the media, but due to positive experiences. It is things like volunteer work or charity work that allows for these positive images to be created.

Data – Engagement with the Autoethnographic Voice

Once the academic literature review was completed, as were the interviews, I went back to identify key themes from each data source. Interestingly, the two data sources did not seem to agree with one another when it came to the common themes. I am going to go over the key themes in the literature review and include my thoughts, opinions, and experiences with regards to these themes. I will then do the same with the data collected from the interviews that were conducted with two sorority women.

As previously exemplified in the literature review section, there were quite a few really strong, and very negative key themes that arose. I have to say, as I was reading through the various articles I was shocked at the titles of the articles and about the topics being written about when it came to the sorority/female fraternity experience, as mine was quite different. The key themes that really made me shake my head were those of alcohol and drug abuse, and body image and the idea of surveillance. Here in this section I will touch on each of these and my thoughts regarding them while comparing them to my own experiences.

Lets begin with alcohol and drug abuse. It is to be understood that in a university or college environment, these will inevitably be present due to select students choosing to bring them along either to school events, club events, or simply into their living spaces. Although drugs and alcohol is not something that can be completely controlled, it is important that academics are not pegging all students associated with Greek-letter organizations and blaming them for the presence of these substances. The problem is that if one student is found to be using or abusing these substances, then the entire group is stigmatized. Personally in my own experiences, I did not have any issues with the use or abuse of substances when with my sisters. Due to the fact that my organization did not allow alcohol to be present at most events, it was

simply never a problem. Our organization has a ton of risk management protocols that must be followed for every single event that is planned, whether it is for a sisterhood event, or a recruitment event. If for some reason there may be alcohol involved, there are numerous precautions taken to ensure there will not be anybody consuming too much alcohol, and that they are safe, of age, and will get home safely as well. Another important thing to consider and keep in mind when reading about alcohol and drug abuse within the various organizations all over North America, is that they are not all the same – of course there are some who do include alcohol at the majority of their events, but they are not all like that.

The second major theme I found among the literature was that of body image issues and the idea of surveillance both among the girls or boys, as well as in co-ed gatherings. The articles were full of issues about eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia. I have to admit I have come in contact with different women who were dealing with an eating disorder or who were recovering from an eating disorder, however their disorders were not caused by their association or membership with our organization. If anything, I can say for sure that I have spoken to a couple women who have told me about their experiences with the eating disorders and one has told me that she suffered from the disorder as a youth in junior high/high school and has since been recovering from it. The other girl that I spoke with dealt with the disorder a little later than the previous, she was in high school/coming into university when she was at her worst. She told me she is actually thankful for the organization and the support it has given her, as she is now much better than she was. I think it is the society that we live in where there is such a high stress placed on young girls to look a certain way, I do not think this is caused by being in a Greek-letter organization. It is important to consider if the topic of eating disorders in GLOs is always

based on scientific data, one person's definition of an eating disorder could be different from the next and whether or not it is diagnosed would be a factor as well.

As far as the idea of surveillance, I think this is sort of intertwined with eating disorders as well. In terms of girls watching other girls and commenting on their body types and weight, it is something that girls in our society unfortunately have to grow up with. This would be similar with boys as well, both boys picking on other boys for their body types, but also boys picking on girls over their body types too. I wonder if this may potentially also stem from current members wanting everyone in their organization to fit a certain mould to be the 'prettiest' or best looking sorority (or fraternity) on campus. This could also be related back to the start of sororities when only those who were white and from a high social class could join. From my own experience, I have never seen a girl pick on another over her body, there is such a feeling of love and support that I cannot even imagine this happening in an organization, but as I have clearly mentioned before, not all organizations are the same. My organization runs different workshops to help the girls learn what is appropriate and what is not, as well as what is considered business attire and what is not. Knowing these standards are beneficial for when representing the organization, and also for future business or career endeavours.

Within the interviews there were many different themes that were mentioned. Of course some of these themes were mentioned due to the questions I asked of the women, but even with those questions that I chose, they both found themselves wandering away from the main question and onto information about something else that was related, but conveniently similar to the other interviewee. Having the input of these two informants was beneficial in that it added quality and validity to the study while also proving the academic literature cannot act as an umbrella over all GLOs. Two of the really strong themes I found among the interview data were personal growth

and a feeling of sisterhood, as well as academic achievement. These are two themes that I had a feeling would come out as they are two of the strongest benefits that I experiences as well.

For those in my organization, sisterhood and personal growth and very important aspects, and are high on the list of values. To begin, sisterhood is one of the key values for our organization and this value is used to plan various events to build the bond between sisters. From my experience and obviously from the experience of the key informants, sisterhood has always been front and center. There are always sisterhood retreats happening, or gift exchanges between sisters (almost like a Secret Santa). A huge aspect of sisterhood and bonding happens every week at the start of the weekly meetings where the sisters often show up early just to hang out with each other. I have also had great experience with doing both academic and recreational things with my sisters outside of the scheduled events and meetings. Those who are in a Greek-letter organization know that it isn't something you do for four years and then it is over, it lasts a lifetime!

I just stood as a bridesmaid with one of my sisters for one of our sisters, without the organization we probably would have never became as close as we are as we only had a few classes together. I have remained in close contact with many girls who have all since graduated and I would not have their friendship if it weren't for our organization. The power in knowing there is always someone there for you is incredible – this is something that came up in both the interviews that I would totally agree with. No matter what may be happening in someone's life, there is likely someone among the group who can relate. In terms of personal growth there are a ton of examples! I have definitely matured a lot since being surrounded by such powerful and supportive women. From both the interviews, I gathered that the women felt the same way. Being in a room of 40+ women with the same values as yourself is incredible and when you

surround yourself with those kinds of people and relationships, it is hard not to experience personal growth. Aside from the “informal” ways I developed and grew over time, there were also various workshops held that helped with personal growth, whether it was about proper table etiquette, or something about how to wear proper business attire; there was always something happening to advance me as a woman that would further me in life.

In terms of academics within this type of organization, the possibilities are truly remarkable. Both the ladies I interviewed talked about different ways in which they have succeeded further in their academics due to the aid of the organization. Personally, when I first joined, I did not have the proper GPA to meet the requirements – similar to Key Informant B. Once the girls got to know me, they decided they would let me in but put me on a study plan to get my marks up to where they needed to be. With the help of a mandatory study session every week, and the support of my sisters both motivationally and in terms of editing papers and test preparation, I was able to get my GPA up and then I graduated. Since graduating from that school and transferring to where I am now, I have developed so many useful, and what some many consider simple, skills such as time management and prioritizing. Without the support I received from my sisters and the organization as a whole, I probably would not be writing this thesis to graduate this semester with an honours degree. It has been such a positive experience for me.

Without the space of the organization, I personally would not attempt to affect any sort of change on my own. When a policy change is in the works at the school, if I did not agree, I would not go alone and try to convince the school that I alone think it is not beneficial. However, since being part of the organization, I have been able to take part in different public events that affect my education – such as tuition increases. Something I am quite passionate about it

volunteering, I think it is important to give my time to those who aren't as lucky to have the time and resources I have, however sometimes I don't feel comfortable doing certain things alone.

With the support of my sisters and organization as a whole, I have volunteered at homeless shelters, and served at soup kitchens. My organization has been a very empowering space for me, and from experiences I have heard of, my sisters and women from other GLOs as well.

Conclusion

Returning to the main research question on whether sororities can be considered empowering social spaces and have the potential to have possible access to routes to the public sphere, it would appear that based on the responses from the interviews, sororities are definitely empowering social spaces for the women involved. Greek-letter organizations were originally created in effort of making a space for those who did not have a space to discuss issues that were important to them. After looking at the research, it seems as though they definitely provide a safe space for discussion, and even more importantly, they have the potential to act as an access or doorway into the public sphere. The sororities are a space where there is power in numbers, and members are able to do things that they may not have been able to do on their own.

The data that appeared from all three sources – autoethnography, interviews, and literature review seem to be quite divided in relation to the public sphere and empowering social space argument. With the autoethnography portion of the study, there is evidence to support the claim that sorority membership definitely provides an empowering social space for the women involved. Based on the sense of community, the support systems and programs – both formal and informal among the sisters, and the support from the organization as a whole, it provides a space for these young women to feel and know that they can accomplish whatever they choose. If at any point there is any sense of self-doubt or lack of motivation, there will be someone there to

help push them forward towards their goals and dreams. Through my personal experiences with a GLO, proved that it was space where I felt safe talking about personal things, and trusted my sisters to support me whenever she needed it. Part of the point of a sorority is to have a place where there is a sense of feeling welcomed and a sense of comfort.

In terms of the literature review, there were obviously some extremely negative themes that arose and that did not seem to connect with my experiences, nor the experiences of the key informants. It is important to remember that the literature was likely written by outsiders who have very different experiences from insiders and the media is the same. As both of the key informants mentioned, as the smallest piece of information is made public, whether it is correct or not, readers and listeners are quick to draw conclusions. The information that was pulled from the literature review was a great starting point to see where the focus was and what type of data was missing in order to know what data was needed.

Both key informants had very similar points in their interviews with regards to each of the questions they were asked. Based on how the question of the study seeks to explore if the reason/purpose for there being sororities is still to provide empowering social space as there was in the past, the fact that the responses of the key informants were similar says a lot about how things have not changed all that much. Sororities are still being used as a vehicle for women to get together and share their common thoughts and experiences, and also to discuss ways in which they can better themselves and their community. The fact that the key informants made similar claims about their experiences within their organization and that it was this way 15 years ago and is still continuing the same way proves that the key values are still very present and do not appear to be heading in a different direction any time soon.

The literature review was totally inconsistent with the responses from the key informants and my autoethnographical experiences. The reason for this disconnect could be explained as being correlated with the fact that these are closed organizations with a secretive nature. There is a notion of suspicion involved, which could explain the differences between the literature review and the other data sources. The responses from the interviews and my experience provide evidence that sororities are an empowering space for young women, and they have the potential, to act as an access route to the public sphere. The organization is used to participate in public space in a way which as individuals, the members may not have participated in otherwise.

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