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The Body Image Culture Within Sororities: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Focus groups were conducted within sororities to examine their body image culture. Results from a thematic analysis showed that although the women reported a high level of appearance-related pressures, the sense of community within the sorority serves as a protective factor against unhealthy thoughts and behaviors, and promotes relationships based on values (as opposed to appearance). Results need to be examined in light of the sororities' long term participation in a positive body image promotion program.

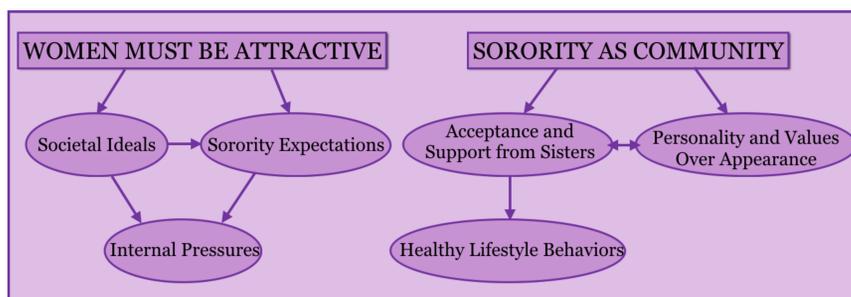
Introduction

It has been reported that disordered eating behaviors occur in as many as 34%-67% of college women (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012). Although evidence is mixed, studies have supported the idea that sorority women are at increased risk for eating disorders (e.g., Cashel et al., 2003). As a result, prevention efforts have targeted sorority women specifically (e.g., Becker, Smith, & Ciao, 2005). The Sister to Sister Peer Mentor Program is an eating disorders prevention program that operates within the sororities of West Chester University. The program is designed to improve body image, increase self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, and reduce problematic eating behaviors and attitudes that could contribute to the development of disordered eating. Since its development in 2000, the program has been evaluated through quantitative methods and was found to be effective at decreasing disordered eating attitudes in sorority women when compared to other university women (Zotter, 2016). The goal of the present research was to investigate the body image culture of the sororities in which the program operates through qualitative methods.

Method

Eight separate focus group discussions were conducted with the eight sororities involved with the Sister to Sister program since its inception. Participants were 84 undergraduate sorority women (mean age =19.66) involved with their sorority for an average of 3.62 semesters. Focus group sizes ranged from 4-16 participants. Research assistants were trained as moderators and note-takers using a focus group methodology developed from the research of Hennink (2007). The participants were prompted by the moderator with questions about their perceptions and experiences within their sorority and with the Sister to Sister program. Audio and visual recording was used to ensure the accuracy of transcription. Focus group discussions lasted 60-90 minutes. A monetary incentive of a \$25 Amazon gift card was raffled off to one participant at the end of each discussion.

Figure 1



Results

All focus groups were transcribed by trained research assistants. A thematic analysis was conducted to determine the body image culture within sororities on the WCU campus. Two overarching themes emerged: Women must be attractive and Sorority as community. (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the thematic map.)

Women must be attractive. This overarching theme evolved from the themes of *societal ideals*, *sorority expectations*, and *internal pressures*. Table 1 displays data extracts in support of these themes.

Table 1

Themes and data extracts in support of *Women must be attractive*

Societal ideals

- In reference to social media: “. . . like Kim Kardashian, all these girls who have such unrealistic bodies that I don’t even know how it’s possible. It defies gravity!” (S6, Abby)
- “It’s hard in a society where you want to be small, but when you’re that skinny people also make comments like, ‘Oh, you don’t have a butt.’” (S7, Carly)

Sorority expectations

- “When they gave us our [sorority] letters, they were like, ‘We want you to wear them proudly. . . brush your hair, put on make-up, make yourself look presentable.’” (S2, Rachel)
- “If we see [a sister] that doesn’t look appropriate, we are supposed to approach them; but I don’t know how to say that without being an asshole.” (S3, Sara)

Internal pressures

- In reference to comments made about appearance: “I think a lot of the time you are your own worst critic.” (S1, Olga)
- “Someone could be the same exact size as me and I would still think I’m probably like 10 pounds more.” (S8, Mary)

Sorority as community. This overarching theme evolved from the themes of *acceptance and support from sisters*, *personality and values over appearance*, and *healthy lifestyle behaviors*. Table 2 displays data extracts as examples of these themes.

Table 2

Themes and data extracts in support of *Sorority as Community*

Acceptance and support from sisters

- “Not only do all of us know each other’s names, but everyone can say they have some kind of connection with every [sister].” (S4, Riley)
- “We’re all so comfortable around each other, and we all know that we’re all different shapes and sizes.” (S3, Kim)
- “If anyone talks badly about your sister in any sense, you stick up for them.” (S7, Julie)

Personality and values over appearance

- “You bond over what actually matters – who the person is and what they have to say.” (S1, Yvonne)
- In reference to recruitment: “It’s based on personality more than anything else. Obviously you’re going to want a girl for who she is, not what she looks like.” (S3, Diane)

Healthy lifestyle behaviors

- “Obviously we would encourage [their exercise] if it’s their goal; but if it was something that gets detrimental, we would have a [Sister to Sister] peer mentor talk to them.” (S5, RJ)

Discussion

The sorority women that participated in this study spoke of pressures on women to be attractive stemming from two main sources: general beauty ideals from society, and expectations aimed specifically at sorority women. Ultimately, the women internalized pressures to meet these expectations. However, the women described their sisterhood as creating a positive community that works as a buffer against the negative effects of appearance pressures. The sorority community itself provides acceptance and support for its members, and inspires the women to create meaningful bonds with each other. The women described support in healthy lifestyle behaviors, which includes intervention when behaviors become extreme. Although these themes were present overall, sororities showed variability in their experiences, such as the level of importance placed on appearance in their recruitment of new members. For the sororities studied, the Sister to Sister Program may be a contributing factor in creating the positive community that serves as a buffer to the pressures around appearance. Through its teachings on positive body image, acceptance, empowerment, healthy lifestyles, and eating disorder awareness, the program may be providing a foundation for a healthier body image culture within sororities. The present findings may have implications for other eating disorder prevention programs.