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College, Greek life; The Pressure to be perfect, and the Outcomes

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Research has demonstrated that the college environment is one that exerts pressure on women to attain a thin ideal. This pressure is notably heightened for sorority members who undergo a socialization process that has a heavy emphasis on physical appearance. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the literature on college students and Greek life to review the role communication plays between college students and Greek life in relation to body image. I will review social pressure college students face, how Greek life plays into these social pressures, and the effects and outcomes of these social pressures. My goal is to better understand why college students are so susceptible to eating disorders, and more specifically the students who decide to join Greek life.

**Methods:**

My research was done through the Communication and Mass Media Complete database. I was interested in reviewing the literature about the social pressures in regards to physical appearance that college students face. I began to research “college” and “social pressure” and got 487 results. College is a time when students experience a lot of social pressure. There were 41 studies that focused on female college students and the pressures to maintain the “thin ideal” that the media has put out there. Since the specific topic I am exploring is Greek life I wanted to research social pressures in Greek life. One study in particular seemed to tie together a lot of the factors the majority of the studies done on Greek life were about: “Body Objectification, Social Pressure, and Disordered Eating Behavior in College Women: The Role of Sorority Membership”. The research I will be analyzing looks at the social pressure college students face, in particular college women, to obtain the “thin ideal” and how Greek life can amplify these social pressures which has numerous outcomes such as body objectification, body shame, and disordered eating/behaviors. I narrowed in on a total of 27 studies, as the remaining studies were insignificant, looked at more psychological studies, or were not peer reviewed academic journals.

**Themes:**

Social Pressure

College is a time when students experience a lot of social pressures, particularly pressures from the media regarding physical appearance (Basow et al, 2007; Gaines et al, 2014; Sheldon, 2010). Among my research I had consistent findings for both male and female students alike that young people live in an environment where social support is low, yet the pressure to achieve is extremely high. More specifically, on college campuses perfectionism is prevalent. Sheldon (2010) explored college students and which groups they felt more pressure from, such as peer, family, and mass media. It was found that men and women experience pressure from their families, however women reported greater levels of pressure from their fellow peers, and media. Women compare themselves to the models depicted in the media, report higher levels of pressure from the media and peers to obtain what society deems as attractive. This could explain why when I conducted my research I found that many of the studies about social pressures focused on the female population.

More specifically, studies found that there was a lot of social pressure for college women to maintain the “thin ideal” (Sheldon, 2010; Furia et al; 2009; Vohs et al, 2001). Sheldon (2010) concluded that women actually consume more media than their fellow male peers. Based off of the social cultivation theory, the more media one is exposed to the more likely they are to believe it as reality. This could help to explain why college women report higher levels of pressure from the media. The average model is 5’11” and 120 pounds, the average college women is 5’4” and 140 pounds (Sheldon, 2010). Among family and peers, peers had the greatest influence on body esteem for College women. This is not surprising because women discuss body weight with each other, and college women vehemently compare themselves to their peers. Furia (2009) found that college men demonstrated higher intrinsic motivation to maintain a healthy weight than women. This suggests that intrinsic motivation may not be the main driving force behind female students’ desire to obtain a healthy weight, but that the main driving force may be extrinsic, such as complying with our culture’s norm of beauty, which is the “thin ideal.” This drive for the “thin ideal” for college women is caused by media, but also through the messages received from peers, as Sheldon determined.

The literature reviewed for this study also implicated that perceived social pressures are highest among sorority women, and that sororities push members to be thin, attractive, and social (Crandall, 1988; Basow et al, 2007; Ovrego, 2015). Basow (2007) looked at social pressures among girls who intended to join sororities, sorority members, and those who did not participate in Greek life at all. It was discovered that both sorority members and those who intended to join sororities reported higher levels of perceived social pressure than the female students who were not in Greek life, or intending to join it. So why do females in sororities report an increased drive to obtain the “thin ideal”? Ovrego (2015) evaluated memorable messages among sorority members. A majority of the memorable messages found that the main content and function of sorority members’ memorable messages related to appearance and weight. They interpreted over 200 sorority girls’ memorable messages and found that 68.6% of them were about weight and appearance, and were confirming in nature. While most of the messages were meant as compliments and affirmed the other sisters, they stressed the importance of physical appearance. This focus on physical appearance could help to clarify why sorority members felt a greater amount of social pressure from other sorority members to achieve the “thin ideal”. What was interesting in Basow’s (2007) findings was that those who were not yet in a sorority, but intended to join one, also felt more social pressure. This suggests that perhaps sororities attract a certain type of female who already is prone to higher levels of perceived social pressure. This is a topic almost completely unexplored, and would be interesting to analyze whether certain types of people are predisposed to having these issues and are naturally attracted to certain social organizations. The study also noted that over the years, perceived social pressure actually increased among sorority members. This may be because sorority members are like- minded individuals, and naturally after being surrounded by each other frequently over the years the perceived pressure to reach the “thin ideal” increases. In this paper I will explore the effects of this social pressure on sorority members, and the outcomes it has on members.

Socialization process:

The research reviewed demonstrated that the pressure to be thin, attractive, and social in sororities is a function of the socialization process, notably rush week (Basow et al, 2007; Ovrego et al, 2015; Keller et al, 1982; Atlas et al, 1994; Rolnik et al, 2010; Evans, 1997). Evans (1997) looked at different female social groups on college campuses: sorority women, athletes, and residence hall females, in regard to attitudes towards weight and appearance. Sorority women reported highest on sociocultural attitudes towards appearance scale, meaning as a group they had a higher awareness about beauty and weight norms, such as the “thin ideal”. Ovrego (2015) analyzed memorable messages among sorority members, and also found that memorable messages in rush were heavily appearance based. This emphasis on appearance among members carries into rush week, which can add pressure to prospective members to also be the “thin ideal”. I will continue to analyze the effects this focus on appearance and weight during rush week can have on females.

Females who participate in sorority rush week, and members of sororities, report higher levels of body objectification (Basow et al, 2007; Rolnik et al, 2010). The literature around the rush process explores the impact of rush on self-objectification theory. Self-objectification theory can be defined as “a self-perspective that involves taking a primary view of the self as an object; viewing oneself from a third-person perspective as opposed to a first-person perspective” (Calogero, 2012). There is a huge focus on the physical appearance in the rush process which can have the potential to be an objectifying process for the rushees. Rolnik (2010) predicted that sorority rush participation would lead to an increase in self-objectification. It was shown that rush participants predicted higher levels of body objectification theory, and these findings are also supported by Basow (2007). What this study does not show is if the rush process is what causes an increase in self-objectification, because the rushees who participated reported higher levels of self-objectification at all times of rush, which could mean the type of people who choose to rush in general already have higher levels of self-objectification. Also this study was done at one small, elite, Midwestern school, which may not be a representative sample of sorority women. Once the rush process ends and girls are a part of their sororities it is predicted that sorority members continue to score higher on measures of body objectification during their time as sorority members (Basow 2007). Basow (2007) determined that there is a correlation with amount of time spent living in a sorority house as well as degree of social pressure that correlates positively with higher scores of body objectification.

Although little research has been done on fraternities, fraternity and sorority socialization is associated with a greater acceptance of sexual objectification of women (Seabrook et al, 2016; Murnen et al, 2007; Moorse, 2008). There are many reasons such as the rush process, and sorority housing that have been shown to cause higher levels of body objectification. However, there is also literature around fraternities and the sexual objectification of women. Once women are a part of a sorority, the socialization process continues. Many of the women that fraternities have parties with consist of sorority members. Analysis has been done on daily diary samples ( Swim et al, 2001) and reported that 94% of undergraduate women experienced unwanted objectifying sexual language and behaviors at least once, or more, over the course of a semester. Seabrook (2016) found that fraternity members feel pressure to uphold masculine norms, and are more likely to see women as sexual objects. There is a direct relation of sexual objectification to self-objectification (Hill, 2008). So it may be that other elements cause a high level of body objectification among sorority members but the combination of sororities and fraternities may also be a factor.

Outcomes:

The socialization process in Greek life may cause high levels of body objectification among sorority members, which has been found to lead to increased levels of body shame (Rolnik et al, 2010; Tiggemann et al, 2008; Choma et al, 2010). Rolnik (2010) looked specifically at sorority rush and the relation to self-objectification, and found that a month after joining the sorority members demonstrated an increase in body shame compared to those who did not participate in Greek life. Basow (2007) also found that sorority women, and those who planned on rushing reported higher levels of body surveillance and body shame compared to their peers who did not intend to rush or were not in a sorority. Again, this study points out that even before the females went through rush they reported higher levels of body shame, which suggests that sororities may attract women who already perceive social pressures. Through my analysis of research I have found that higher levels of body shame corresponds directly with disordered eating/attitudes.

Higher levels of body shame have been predicted to lead to eating disorders/attitudes (Dakanalis et. al. 2014; Jackson et. al., 2015; Hill et. al., 2008). All of these studies looked specifically at college women and found that body shame is a mediating factor between body objectification and eating disorders. However there have been numerous studies that have determined when a women reports higher levels of self-objectification there is a direct correspondence to levels of body shame. The outcomes of these two factors are disordered eating and disordered eating attitudes.

The past studies have found sorority women report higher levels of body objectification, which have led to an issue of disordered eating in sororities (Becker, 2005; Kelly, 2004; Kirk 2016; Meilman 1991; Schulken 1997). College students are at the average age for the onset of eating disorders (Mehler, 2014). Crandall (1988) went as far as to say that sororities specifically act as breeding groups for eating disorders. When interpreting all the current literature I have come to the final outcome that combined with the increased levels of body objectification, and body shame shown by females who participate in Greek life, sorority women are more vulnerable to disordered eating /attitudes than their peers. They also found a positive relation between years spent living in a sorority house and scores on the bulimia and body dissatisfaction subscales (Basow 2007). This is not surprising to me considering the more time sorority members spend together, and the more frequently they talk about appearances then naturally they will report an increase in disordered eating/behaviors. Other past research also supports this claim that Greek life provides a solid base for eating disorders (Becker, 2005; Kelly, 2004; Averett et. al., 2016; Meilman, 1991; Schulken, 1997).

Conclusion:

This paper analyzed the ways in which college students, more specifically, students who decide to join Greek life are a vulnerable population to body image disturbances. College students are faced with a lot of social pressures, the one that I focused on was the pressure to attain the thin ideal. It is shown that college women perceive a greater level of pressure to attain the thin ideal than their male peers (Sheldon, 2010). Out of the social organizations offered on college campuses the women who decided to join Greek life reported the highest level of perceived pressure to be the thin ideal (Basow, 2007). This pressure is apparent through the socialization process, in particular rush week for sororities. During this week women who rush report higher levels of body objectification than those who did not rush, and throughout the years of being in a sorority they continue to report higher levels of body objectification than students not in Greek life. Majority of the studies focused on college women, and sororities, however the socialization of sororities and fraternities, such as parties or date functions, also show higher levels of sexual objectification of women, which has a direct link to body objectification (Hill, 2008). Body objectification has several negative outcomes, one being higher levels of body shame. Body shame has been shown in numerous studies that it is a mediating factor for disordered eating behaviors and attitudes (Dakanalis et. al., 2014; Jackson et. al.; 2015, Hill et. al., 2008). After my analysis I have come to the conclusion that it is not college or Greek life that directly cause disordered eating, however there are numerous mediating factors that they do cause, such a social pressures, body objectification, and body shame, which ultimately lead to disordered eating behaviors and attitudes.

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