

Perceptions of Greek Organizations

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PERCEPTIONS OF GREEK ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

This study sought to determine whether there would be significant differences between Greek and non-Greeks' perceptions of a person wearing a shirt with Greek letters. It was hypothesized that non-Greek participants would rate the person as less credible than Greek participants.

Participants were 50 undergraduate students at a large Mid-western university. Thirty four percent were Greek and 66% were not. An independent sample *t*-test was conducted ($t = 2.49, p = .02$). Results gave support to hypothesis one. The mean credibility rating given by non-Greek participants was 3.93 and the mean rating given by Greek participants was 5.03. This coincides with previous research that stereotypes of fraternal organizations persist and members of fraternities and sororities are perceived as less credible by their non-Greek counterparts.

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Popular media often portrays members of sororities and fraternities on college campuses as individuals that pursue higher education solely to consume excessive amounts of alcohol and attend social gatherings in a university setting. Greek organizations are also known for providing services to their communities and universities; however, this is rarely seen in movies and television and therefore, the stereotypical party life of Greek students is still widely publicized.

These depictions can negatively impact a student's decision to join a Greek organization simply because of the negative stigma sometimes attached to the affiliation. In addition, the services these organizations to the community could be undermined simply because of the source of the service. Unfortunately, there is little research that indicates how media portrayal of Greek-affiliated students affects non-Greek students' perceptions of the sorority and fraternity lifestyle. This study will investigate how the perceptions of sororities and fraternities impact their overall credibility to non-Greek students.

Previous Research on Sororities and Fraternities

Measuring Attitudes Towards Greeks

Although scarce, previous research has revealed various perceptions of sororities and fraternities. A study conducted by Cokley et al. (2001) designed an instrument believed to gauge college students' attitudes toward pledging and hazing in Greek life. The participants, which included both Greek and non-Greek students, completed a survey designed to measure attitudes toward the pledge process in fraternal organizations. Greek members were found to have more positive beliefs regarding the purpose of pledging than were non-Greeks. Also, participants involved in Greek-life were more likely to have positive perceptions of fraternal organizations than the non-Greek participants. The survey measure itself appeared to have adequate internal consistency and warrants replication in future studies.

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An additional study by Wells and Corts (2008) investigated the implicit attitudes toward non-service and non-academically centered fraternities and sororities. Participants, which included both Greek and non-Greek students, took part in the study in two phases. Phase one measured each groups' explicit attitudes toward Greek organizations by manner of survey. Phase two employed an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure participants' implicit attitudes by associating words such as "Greek" or "sorority" with negative (bad, evil, etc.) or positive (good, etc.) words. In accordance with the hypothesis, results indicated that Greek participants had positive implicit and explicit attitudes towards Greek life and services. However, it was also found that non-Greek participants had negative, rather than the hypothesized "neutral," attitudes towards fraternal organizations. This serves as support for the hypothesis of the current study regarding perceptions of sororities and fraternities.

Negative Perceptions of Greeks

Examples of negative Greek stereotypes are widely documented in previous research. For example, Storch and Storch (2002) investigated the relationship between involvement in a Greek organization and levels of self-reported academic dishonesty, such as using a cheat sheet or plagiarizing. It was found that participants involved with fraternities or sororities reported significantly higher levels of academic dishonesty than participants that were not involved with a fraternal organization. This serves as a discretization for the quality of academic work performed by Greek students during their time in higher education.

Additionally, the stereotype of excessive alcohol consumption and other harmful health behaviors in fraternal organizations is consistently revealed throughout research findings. Scott-Sheldon, Carey and Carey (2008) investigated the relationship between behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and affiliation with fraternities and sororities. Greek and non-Greek

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participants answered various surveys designed to establish patterns of alcohol, cigarette and drug use, sexual behaviors, diet, caffeine use, physical activity, and sleeping patterns. Results found that Greek students were more likely to participate in alcohol use, cigarette smoking, and sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs than their non-Greek counterparts. However, the two groups did not differ significantly in areas such as condom use or unprotected sex, diet or physical activity behaviors. This adds to the general stereotype of members of fraternal organizations as being interested solely in a lifestyle including drugs and alcohol to an excess.

Also, Baer and Carney (1993) conducted a study to determine the possible biases that occur in sorority and fraternity students with regards to perceptions of how often their peers engage in problematic drinking, and how they attribute the cause of that problem accordingly. It was found that Greeks rated others as drinking more and having more alcohol-related problems than they themselves had. In addition, drinking as a way to fit in often reveals itself within Greek organizations, especially with regards to incoming students that are looking to identify themselves with a group. This can also be seen in a study by Rimal and Real (2005) which found that incoming freshman had learned to associate alcohol consumption with being a typical college experience and having important social benefits, such as acceptance and assimilation into college life. Participants were found to perceive joining a sorority or fraternity as a common way to do so.

The pledge process and hazing are also widely publicized events associated with dangerous initiation activities into sororities or fraternities, including excessive consumption of alcohol to be accepted into the organization, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Drout and Corsoro (2003) examined Greek and non-Greek students' perceptions of a hazing incident involving an alcohol overdose. Different scenarios were presented (e.g. alcohol consumed of

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own free will or by pressure from Greek peers) and participants were asked to assign attributions of responsibility and causal attributions. Fraternity members were more likely to be held responsible in scenarios that involved involuntary consumption of alcohol. Participants involved with a fraternity were more likely to defend the hazing incident, while participants in sororities or not affiliated with Greek organizations were more likely to assign blame to the fraternity leaders. These results are somewhat similar to the findings of Cokley et al. (2001).

Another problematic issue in the world of Greek life is that of body image of young women in sororities. Rolnik, Engeln-Maddox, and Miller (2010) examined the extent to which sorority rush processes affected self-objectification and body image disturbance in 127 first year undergraduate women. Participants were divided into those that participated and completed the rush process, those who participated but did not finish, those who did not participate in rush at all and those who participated and received a bid but did not join a sorority. All participants completed a survey that measured body shame and self-objectification, in addition to a survey that measured eating disordered attitudes and behaviors at four different times during the study. It was found that increases in self-objectification, body shame, and eating disordered behaviors occurred at single time points of the study, but did not occur longitudinally. However, rush participants revealed greater levels of self-objectification at all times surveyed during the rush process. This reflects negatively on sororities in that they can be perceived as only being concerned about looks when recruiting pledges and not focused on being good social organizations for incoming students.

Positive Perceptions of Greeks

In contrast to stereotypes and some previous research, some studies do reveal a different side of sororities and fraternities rarely seen or expected by those not involved in Greek life.

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McCabe et al. (2005) conducted a study to examine the correlation between fraternity and sorority membership and substance use patterns. The study followed participants from their senior year in high school throughout college and measured their levels of substance use during three different time periods. Both students who did and did not eventually join sororities and fraternities were studied and results concluded that those that did engage in Greek life had higher levels of drinking, marijuana use, and cigarette smoking than non-Greeks at each time period. These results indicated that substance use is a preexisting personality trait and is not necessarily the result of joining a fraternity or sorority.

Another stereotype perpetuated through media is that of sexual victimization and promiscuity of sorority members. Sawyer, Schulken, and Pinciaro (1997) conducted a survey to investigate the varying degrees of sexual victimization of sorority women and non-sorority women comparatively. In addition, participants were asked questions regarding sexual experience such as number of sexual partners and birth control usage. This study surveyed only sorority women and compared them to a previous study of sexual victimization of non-sorority women. While initially hypothesized that members of sororities would reveal higher levels of sexual experience and victimization, the results yielded findings that contradict the hypothesis. Specifically, that sorority women were less likely than non-sorority women in the comparative study to have experienced sexual victimization. Also, research suggested that sorority women and non-sorority women produced similar results in areas of sexual activity and other behaviors, such as contraceptive use. However, this study was conducted at only one campus and further research is needed to improve the generalizability of this study's findings.

It is hypothesized that students that are not members of fraternities or sororities will perceive a person thought to be a member of a Greek organization as less credible than would a

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Greek student.

H1: Participants that are not members of a fraternity or sorority will perceive the photo of a person wearing a Greek lettered shirt as less credible than would participants that are members of a fraternity or sorority.

Method

Participants

Participants were 50 students (24 men, 26 women) from a large Mid-Atlantic university. Participants were recruited by entering lecture classes and soliciting students at various locations around campus. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 37 years ($M = 21.02$, $SD = 2.68$). 6% of participants were freshman, 18% were sophomores, 24% were juniors, and 52% were seniors. Ethnic makeup of the sample was 84% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, 12% African American, and 2% other. Thirty four percent were members of a sorority or fraternity, while 66% were not members.

Procedures and Instrumentation

A convenience sample was used to obtain participants. Respondents were instructed to complete the survey based on their own beliefs and perspectives. The questionnaire included five measures. The first four measures, in addition to the demographic questions, served to determine participants' preexisting feelings towards fraternities and sororities.

The Generalized Attitude Measure (McCrosky and Richmond, 1996) is a 6-item instrument that asked students to indicate their general attitudes towards sororities and fraternities (e.g., Sororities and Fraternities are: Good/Bad, Wrong/Right, etc). Responses were solicited using a 7-point Likert scale with numbers "1" and "7" indicating very strong feeling, "2" and "6" indicating a strong feeling, "3" and "5" indicating a fairly weak feeling, and "4"

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indicating no opinion. A reliability coefficient of .93 ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.35$) was achieved.

The Generalized Belief Measure (McCrosky and Richmond, 1996) is a 5-item instrument that asked students to indicate their general beliefs towards the statement “Members of fraternities and sororities consume more alcohol than students not involved with fraternities and sororities” (e.g., Agree/Disagree, Incorrect/Correct). Responses were solicited using a 7-point Likert scale with numbers “1” and “7” indicating very strong feeling, “2” and “6” indicating a strong feeling, “3” and “5” indicating a fairly weak feeling, and “4” indicating no opinion. A reliability coefficient of .97 ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.90$) was achieved. The same measure was used to obtain beliefs about the statement “Members of fraternities and sororities receive higher grades or grades equal to students that are not involved with fraternities or sororities.” A reliability coefficient of .97 ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.69$) was achieved. The same measure was used a third and final time for the statement “Members of fraternities and sororities receive preferential treatment at West Virginia University.” A reliability coefficient of .95 ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.48$) was achieved.

Finally, the Source Credibility Measure (McCrosky and Teven, 1999) is an 18-item instrument that asks students to indicate their perceptions of an individual’s credibility (e.g., Intelligent/Unintelligent, Inexpert/Expert). This study employed a photo of a college aged male wearing a grey shirt embossed with Greek letters as to indicate membership in a fraternity. Because this study used a photo instead of a video or source, several items were omitted from the survey, such as “Cares about me/Doesn’t care about me, Has my best interests at heart/Doesn’t have my best interests at heart.” The modified measure included a total of 14 items. Responses were solicited using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1-7 with numbers “1” and “7” indicating very strong feeling, “2” and “6” indicating a strong feeling, “3” and “5” indicating a fairly weak

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feeling, and “4” indicating no opinion. A reliability coefficient of .97 ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.20$) was achieved.

Results

The hypothesis stated that participants that were not members of fraternities or sororities would perceive the person in the photo as less credible than participants involved in a Greek organization. To test the hypothesis, an independent sample t -test was conducted ($t = 2.49$, $p = .02$). Results gave support to hypothesis one. The mean credibility rating given by non-Greek participants was 3.93 and the mean rating given by Greek participants was 5.03. In addition to significant differences in mean credibility ratings, there were also significant differences between Greeks and non-Greeks with regards to general beliefs about fraternities and sororities as organizations ($t = 7.98$, $p < .01$). The mean rating for Greek participants was 6.16 and the mean rating for non-Greek participants was 4.04. Additionally, Greek participants were more likely to agree with the statement “Students that are members of fraternities or sororities receive grades better or equivalent to students that are not members of fraternities or sororities.” The mean rating for Greeks was 5.29, while the mean rating for non-Greeks was 3.79 ($t = 3.25$, $p < .01$). However, no significant differences were found between Greeks and non-Greeks when reporting data regarding alcohol consumption patterns or preferential treatment of Greek students.

Discussion

This study sought to determine whether there would be significant differences between Greek and non-Greek students when evaluating credibility of a person thought to be Greek. In line with previous research, this study found similar results indicating that members of fraternities or sororities are more likely to have more favorable sentiments toward fraternities and sororities. However, while non-Greek participants tended to rate the person in the photo

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more negatively than Greek participants, they also tended to have more neutral feelings toward fraternities and sororities as organizations. This contradicts results found in the study by Wells and Corts (2008) in which non-Greek participants associated negative attributes with fraternal organizations, rather than neutral. Additionally, there were no significant differences between Greeks and non-Greeks in their perceptions of alcohol consumption behaviors of members of fraternal organizations. Previous research conducted by Baer and Carney (1993) found that Greek members tended to deflect stereotypical views of members of fraternal organizations as consuming more alcohol than non-members. Similar results were obtained here in that Greek participants tended to disagree with the statement “Members of fraternities and sororities consume more alcohol than students that are not involved with fraternal organizations.”

Limitations

This study had various limitations. Although adequate internal validity was achieved, external validity is questionable due to sample size ($N = 50$). A larger sample might allow for results that could be applied at a national level. Additionally, West Virginia University has a Greek population of an estimated 1,500 students, only around 15% of the undergraduate student population (WVU Greek Life, 2011; WVU Facts, 2011). Results may change depending on size of any sampled university and the portion of the respective Greek population. Furthermore, this sample was primarily upperclassmen students who have been exposed to Greek life for at least one academic year. An even distribution of participants in their senior, junior, sophomore or freshman year may have yielded different results.

Future Research

There are many directions in which this study could assist with future research. The results supported previous research that non-Greek students have less positive feelings toward

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Greek students. These results could be taken and compared with those received at a larger university or a university with a dominant Greek population on campus. This would serve to examine how non-Greeks in these schools might feel more or less negatively towards Greek organizations, simply because they are such a presence. Additionally, researchers could take this data to Greek organizations at any given university as evidentiary support that their members are not seen as credible and that steps should be made to change the perceptions of Greek organizations.

These findings were consistent with previous research in revealing that negative stereotypes of fraternal organizations persist. This is significant in that it is evident that changes should occur to enhance the external image of Greek organizations. Enhancing perceptions of Greek organizations will ultimately be beneficial for the university and its students, whether they are or are not involved with a fraternity or sorority.

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