

HEALTH AND EDUCATION

**The Downfall of Influential Sorority Environments:
The Sociocultural Factors Affecting Body Image and Health in Sorority Women**

Mass Communication 3018: Research Final

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the sociocultural factors that influence sorority women's attitudes and beliefs toward their perception of body image perception and health. The study will consist of a survey conducted at Louisiana State University among the members of Panhellenic sororities on campus, and following this, a focus group to produce qualitative data. The researcher is likely to discover that the sociocultural factors, peer and media influences have a significant impact on the cognitive process of body image perception and health regimens in sorority women.

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The Downfall of Influential Sorority Environments: The Sociocultural Factors Affecting Body Image and Health in Sorority Women

As many young women transition into college universities they make the decision to join sorority organizations within their freshman year, with the promise of promoted education, philanthropic service, sisterhood, and all things leading to becoming a better woman. In the current year, there are 302,792 sorority women on college campuses in the United States and Canada (National Panhellenic Council, 2012). Through national organization expectations and guided leadership, these undertakings are predominantly fulfilled. A normal collegiate lifestyle can be enough of a transition for any young women, but with the extra duties of a sorority woman to fulfill, what aspect of a person's lifestyle slips through the cracks? Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with sorority women on Louisiana State University's campus, qualitative data will lead to their attitudes, motives, and beliefs toward their personal views on health and body image. The focus group will also reveal the significant factors that influence their behaviors and attitudes toward health and body image. Also, survey questions will produce quantitative data to present information on the demographics and preliminary psychographics of the respondents regarding body image and factors of persuasion. The purpose of this study is to determine the sociocultural factors that influence sorority women's attitudes and beliefs toward their body image perception and health. The results will be significant to college women, as well as professionals within the health and wellness industry, in order to target areas to improve on wellness programs that support college, specifically sorority, women.

Literature Review

Researching the sorority environment to find out how it affects its members requires discovering the factors that are most influential to the individuals of that environment. The actions and behaviors of most individuals are believed to be influenced by sociocultural factors, including peer, media culture and parental influence (Winston, 2006). The sociocultural theory, first theorized by Lev Vygotsky, is the belief that behaviors and decisions, such as learning, are a result of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986). The research in this study will test the sociocultural model and its level of impact on the individuals engaged in the sorority environment. Sorority women, in particular, are affected by sociocultural factors that result in appearance management behaviors and body image perception (Winston, 2006 ; Rudd 2000).

Peer

The individuals within a sorority environment are surrounded with social pressure to reach many ideals and expectations. Winston believes that according to the sociocultural model, these pressures create the guidelines to which people form their body ideals. The preferred feminine body shape has changed over the years due to changing opinions and standards, linked to dieting in women and the sociocultural pressures to conform to society (Garner, 1980). These cultural standards are perceived and acknowledged by women, and emphasized in situations with strong sociocultural factors, such as many close peers (Winston, 2006). The influential group of peers can then be a factor in the adjustive body behaviors an individual conducts to manage weight or body size, thus

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transforming and guiding the individual's experiences related to body image (Rucker, 1992).

Media Influences

A strong sociocultural factor that continues to evolve and grow over the years is the effect of media into the lives of the individuals that consume the daily news, magazines, advertisements, television, online web sources, and all other content where media thrives. In this current day and age, media has its place in most everything we do. An important aspect of the sociocultural theory in regards to this study is to know the magnitude of effect media plays in the lives of sorority members, and if the individuals process the data in a way that affects their health, or body image perception. According to Thompson (1999), after reading women's magazines 68 percent of women felt worse about their physical appearance. Fifty percent of undergraduate women would like to look more like the models in the cosmetic advertisements. As a response to this cultural force, these feelings can lead to shame, which motivates women to body-improvement behaviors. These actions attempt to gain acceptance and empowerment among peers (Rudd, 2000). Rudd also explains that for certain groups these behaviors can lead to social identity.

Based on the research presented above, the following research questions and hypotheses will guide this study:

RQ1: What sociocultural factors influence sorority members' body image perception and opinions on health?

H1: The more a sorority member compares herself to other peers, the more important appearance will be to that member.

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RQ2: Does the sorority environment create negative effects on sorority members' health?

H2: The more health, fitness and body image is discussed within sorority members, the less comfortable a sorority member will be with her body.

RQ3: Are sociocultural factors reinforced within the sorority environment, amplifying the importance of body image perception and health?

H3: The more involved a sorority member is within their respective organization, the more she will compare herself to her peers.

Method

As the first step of research, a random selection of sorority women on the campus of Louisiana State University, age ranging from 17-23, will be given an online survey consisting of twelve questions. The age range of 17-23 is the standard age range of college students, when college women are active members of their sorority organization. The survey will use the Likert-scale and multiple-choice answers to produce quantitative results, as preliminary research before the focus groups. The survey will be distributed to all sororities on campus to enable equal distribution, and to receive a minimum of one hundred respondents. The survey questions will explore their personal views on body image, the factors that impact their decisions and behaviors, and their level of involvement in the sorority. The Likert-scale will measure their answers with a five-point ranking scale, with the third option as neutral. The purpose of the quantitative survey is to gather preliminary research on sorority women and the sociocultural factors that stand out as independent variables of body image perception and the factors that correlate to

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appearance management behaviors. This enables the second phase of the research, in which qualitative data will be collected from a second group of respondents in focus groups. I will recruit fifty sorority women on LSU campus, to receive a minimum of fifteen sorority women to participate in a focus group to discuss what they believe affects their perception of body image and views on healthy lifestyles. The qualitative data will allow for a greater expression of the social pressures that affect sorority women's body image and views on health. The facilitator of the focus group will prompt questions similar to the survey, but allow for greater in-depth answers.

Discussion

The research study will result in the finding of the most influential sociocultural factors within a sorority environment that affect individuals' body image perception and health. The survey will produce quantitative data to gain basic knowledge of the sociocultural factors to guide the facilitation of the focus groups. The qualitative data gathered from the focus groups will provide an in-depth look of the attitudes and beliefs regarding body image and opinions on health. H1 will find that as an individual compares herself more to her peers, the stronger her regard for a cultural standard of body size or healthy lifestyle will be (Winston, 2006). As sorority members interact more frequently and participate in conversations about fitness, health and body, this too will have a strong effect on an individual. Because of this, as a sorority member engages in more conversations with her peers about these subjects, the less comfortable she will be with her own body, according to H2. The peers within a sorority environment will have the strongest effect and will lead to appearance management behaviors of its members

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(Rudd, 2000), and the research will find that this can produce negative effects on individuals' body image perceptions. H3 will likely show that respondents who are more involved within their sorority, the more likely the sociocultural factor, peer influence will have an effect on the individual, resulting in stronger comparison of body image.

The research from this study will assist professionals in creating wellness programs for sorority women. The results of the influential sociocultural factors will help leaders within sorority environments find ways to create healthier, more positive environments for women. The researcher could also relate sociocultural factors, such as peers and media influence to other areas of behavior in college women, such as risk-taking, academic and social behaviors. Future research could explore the effects of sociocultural factors within a sorority environment that potentially affect women as they become older, into their careers, family, and personal growth.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being the least frequent and 5 being the most frequent, do you compare yourself to your other sorority members in regards to how you look?
2. On a scale from 1 to 5, are you comfortable with your body?
3. On a scale from 1 to 5, have your parents or immediate family members ever spoken negatively about their appearance or health?
4. On a scale from 1 to 5, have your parents or immediate family members ever spoken negatively about your appearance or health?
5. On a scale from 1 to 5, how frequently is health, fitness or body size discussed within sorority members?
6. On a scale from 1 to 5, how important is appearance, in regards to body size?
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, how healthy do you perceive yourself as being?

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8. Ranking the options below from 1 to 4, from least impact to most impact, which option has the most affect on your decisions?

Peers

Parents

Media

Other

Please state: _____

9. Ranking the options below from 1 to 5, from least impact to most impact, what do you rely on the most for news?

Television

Magazines

Newspaper

Social Media

Other

Please state: _____

8. On a scale from 1 to 5, how involved are you in your sorority?

9. What is your classification? Please choose one.

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

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10. Please indicate your age.

Age: _____

11. Please indicate your race.

_____ Native American

_____ White

_____ White, non-Hispanic

_____ Hispanic

_____ African-American

_____ Asian, Pacific Islander

12. Please indicate your hometown.

Hometown: _____