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BLACK ALUMNAE EXPERIENCES IN HISTORICALLY WHITE SORORITIES

by

Shaleeah R. Smith

A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
the College of Education and Human Sciences
and the School of Education
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The first historically white sorority, Alpha Delta Pi, was founded in 1851. Most historically white sororities did not begin to openly accept Black members until the mid-1900s. Since the summer of 2020, many people have been calling for racial justice reform, including within fraternities and sororities. This study sought to fill the gap in literature on Black women's experiences in historically white sororities. The purpose of this study was to understand Black women's experiences and their motivations to join historically white sororities. The study utilized Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought as the guiding framework. The investigation was conducted utilizing interviews that were recorded, transcribed, and coded to find emerging themes. The four prominent themes from the interviews were as follows: (1) social belonging as motivation to join a sorority, (2) lack of knowledge regarding historically Black and culturally-based sororities, (3) disappointment in organization's response to Black Lives Matter, (4) and uncertainty if membership in a historically white sorority was the right choice. The findings of this study suggested that the participants chose to join a historically white sorority for the social aspect and due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of culturally-based sororities. Also, most participants would reconsider their decision to join or would do more research on all the sorority options on their campus. These findings provide implications and suggestions to help create more equitable and inclusive experiences for Black women who choose to join historically white sororities.

Keywords: sorority, Black Lives Matter, Black women, Critical Race Theory

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DEDICATION

I would not be where I am today without the love and support from my mother. I was only able to get this far because of the sacrifices she made for me. I also owe credit to the Black women who helped raise me and made me into the person I am today. Thank you for showing and teaching me what it means to be proud of being Black. Finally, I want to thank myself for never giving up and continuing to push myself. I never thought a first-generation and low-income student like myself could ever make it this far, but here I am. To my youngest brother, Ayden, and to my cousins, Iyona, Acadia, and Kazieh, you're next!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	x
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Problem	1
Purpose Statement	2
Research Questions	2
Significance	3
Definition of Terms	3
Assumptions and Delimitations	4
Summary	4
CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Racism and Discrimination in Historically White Sororities and Fraternities	6

Contemporary Racism and Discrimination	7
The Sorority Experience	8
Black Women’s Sorority Experience	9
Racial Identity Development	9
Critical Race Theory	10
Black Feminist Thought	11
Black Student’s Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions	12
Social Justice Movements on Predominantly White College/University Campuses	14
Summary	16
CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY	17
Research Design	17
Instrument	18
Timeline	18
Participants	18
Data Collection and Analysis	19
Summary	19

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS	21
Social Belonging as Motivation to Join a Sorority	22
Lack of Knowledge on Historically Black and Culturally-Based Sororities	23
Disappointment in Organization’s Response to Black Lives Matter	25
Uncertainty if Membership in a Historically White Sorority was the Best Choice	26
Summary	28
CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION	29
Interpretation of Findings	29
Deciding Against Joining Culturally-Based Sororities	30
Black Lives Matter and Hesitation to Join Again	31
Discussion of Theoretical Framework	32
Implications for Practice	33
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research	34
Conclusion	35
REFERENCES	37
APPENDIX A	44

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Demographics	21
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CBFO</i>	Culturally-Based Fraternities and Sororities
<i>HWFS</i>	Historically White Fraternities and Sororities
<i>HWS</i>	Historically White Sororities
<i>NPC</i>	National Panhellenic Conference

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The first National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sorority, Alpha Delta Pi, was founded in 1851 at Wesleyan Female College in Georgia (Alpha Delta Pi, n.d.). Alpha Delta Pi was established during a time when Black people were still enslaved in many Southern states. Most National Panhellenic Conference sororities were established in the late 1800s - early 1900s, and there are currently 26 NPC sororities today (National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.). Many of the National Panhellenic Conference sororities were founded during a time of slavery or segregation, and many sororities did not accept Black members until the mid-1900s. Even though individual chapters would allow Black members to join, National Panhellenic Conference sororities were and still are very much segregated (Ross, 2015).

Today, National Panhellenic Conference sororities are not organizations known for being diverse and inclusive of all people. Many college and university students have started to call for abolishing historically white fraternities and sororities due to systemic racism, discrimination, and other issues. It is critical that the experiences of Black women in these sororities be shared at such a pivotal time in fraternity and sorority history.

Statement of Problem

With George Floyd's death and widespread protests for racial justice and equality, many people have demanded that National Panhellenic Conference sororities and predominantly white fraternities address their lack of diversity and history of racism and discrimination. Many fraternities and sororities have begun to implement programming and initiatives to address their history. They are educating members on diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to the sorority experience.

Research suggests that Black students who join National Pan-Hellenic Council, historically Black fraternities and sororities, are more engaged on campus and membership has a positive impact on their racial identity development (Mitchell et al., 2017). However, there is little evidence to suggest the same for Black women who choose to join National Panhellenic Conference sororities. This study sought to overcome the limitations of prior scholarship by giving voice to the women who often go unnoticed and unheard.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black alumnae in National Panhellenic Conference sororities. Another purpose was to examine the motivations for Black women choosing to seek membership in NPC organizations. This study collected information from current Black alumnae of NPC sororities between the ages of 18-30. Hopefully, this study will educate national organizations, colleges and universities, faculty, staff, and students on Black women's experiences in NPC organizations.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference sororities?
2. What are the primary motivators for Black women to join National Panhellenic Conference sororities?
3. What, if any, impact did the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement have on Black alumnae perceptions of National Panhellenic Conference Sororities?

Significance

The first significance of this study is that it sought to advance scholarship limitations in this domain. This study gave a voice to Black alumna of these sororities, which will hopefully improve their experience and the experiences of the Black women who will join in the years to come. This research will aid stakeholders, such as campus advisors, volunteer advisors, and headquarters staff, in becoming aware and informed of the experiences Black women in National Panhellenic Conference sororities. Many of these sororities are implementing new initiatives and programs to create safer and more inclusive spaces for women of color, and this research may help them advance such initiatives. Also, many college and university campuses are engaging in efforts to increase student diversity in campus organizations, so this research would be very applicable to campuses similar to those represented in the study.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are essential to this study:

Active member: A person who has been initiated (sworn in, official member) into a fraternity or sorority.

Alumna/ae: A person who was initiated into a sorority or fraternity and has graduated.

National Panhellenic Conference: The national umbrella organization for 26 social sororities (Salinas Jr., 2019).

New member: A person who has not yet been initiated into a fraternity or sorority.

New member education: Classes and education on the history of the fraternity/sorority, alcohol and drug education, hazing prevention education, etc. (Gustavus Adolphus College, n.d).

Assumptions and Delimitations

This research is not without assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. Assumptions are aspects of the study that the researcher believes to be true. The researcher for this study assumes that Black alumnae National Panhellenic Conference sororities would be willing to share their membership experiences in these organizations. The researcher also assumes that Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference sororities did not randomly choose to join their sorority. Instead, it was presumed that it was a specific factor or experience that motivated them to join. Finally, the researcher assumes that all women who participated in the study were honest when answering questions about their experience.

Delimitations are boundaries chosen by the researcher for this study. A delimitation to this study was that it was focused on Black alumnae between the ages of 18-30. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized for all Black alumnae and current undergraduate members. Another delimitation is that this study focuses on Black women and is not representative of all women of color (Asian, Latina, Native American, etc.).

Summary

This study sought to uncover and understand the experiences of Black alumnae of historically white sororities in the United States. As most research on Black sorority women is focused on members of historically Black sororities, there is a lack of knowledge around the experiences of Black women in historically white sororities. The results of this study may benefit student affairs professionals, headquarters staff, and fraternity and sorority members.

Chapter Two examines the relevant literature that relates to fraternities and sororities, Black sorority women, and Black student experiences at predominantly white institutions. The

remaining chapters detail the methodology for the study, report and discuss the findings, and present recommendations for a diverse readership.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the widespread Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020, many fraternities and sororities began to examine their past and current practices to create more inclusive organizations. It is essential to understand Black women's experiences in historically white sororities (HWS) during a time of prevalent social justice movements. Research on the experiences of Black women in HWS is limited. In the attempt to address such scholarly deficiency, this literature review examined research on racism and discrimination in historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS), the sorority experience, and Black women's experiences at predominantly white colleges and universities. Additionally, this chapter provides an overview of the contemporary research on HWFS member's racial identity development and social justice movements on predominantly white colleges and universities.

Racism and Discrimination in Historically White Sororities and Fraternities

Research regarding the history of fraternities and sororities in the United States is limited. Still, the scarce scholarship available served as the foundation for providing the context for today's organizations. Most researchers designate Phi Beta Kappa as the first fraternity. Phi Beta Kappa was founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary. Although it was established as a literary society, it shared many of the same qualities as social fraternities and sororities, mainly Greek letters, rituals, organization governance, etc. (Gillon et al., 2019). Most of the social fraternities and sororities were founded during the 19th and early 20th century, which was during a time when hardly any Black students were attending colleges and universities (Thelin, 2011).

Some of the first fraternities and sororities were established on campuses when they benefited from enslaved Africans by utilizing enslaved Africans on campus, receiving funds from slave owners, and other methods (Wilder, 2013). Once African Americans were allowed to

attend historically white colleges and universities, they could still not join the white social fraternities and sororities. Black students also felt unwelcome and unsafe on these campuses and wanted space for their culture and people, thus creating their own social fraternities and sororities beginning in 1906 (Ross, 2015). The racial exclusion within HWFS continued throughout the 1900s and is still prevalent today.

Contemporary Racism and Discrimination

In more recent years, it has become clear that historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) are still predominantly white and not as welcoming for students of color. Latinx students in culturally-based fraternities and sororities have felt that HWFS members choose not to associate with culturally-based fraternities and sororities. These Latinx students also perceived that HWFS were less inclusive and visibly more white (Garcia, 2019). Black women in historically Black sororities at predominantly white colleges and universities felt their sororities provided a space that they could not find elsewhere on campus (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). These students of color's experiences are not surprising, considering that the culture on these campuses and HWFS primarily benefits white students.

Students of color who chose to join culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs) have voiced concern that they do not receive the same level of support as members of HWFS. Some students reported feeling as if they were ignored by the university and the staff who were supposed to advise them (Beatty et al., 2019; Garcia, 2019). An advising practice among some fraternity and sorority life professionals has been structured as colorblind advising, which disregards race and its effects on a person's life experience. This approach is harmful to students of color in CBFOs and HWFS because professionals choose to ignore race and the way it impacts the student's experience (Beatty et al., 2019; Vaccaro, 2017).

Recruitment for HWFS can be a source of oppression for students of color. A potential new member may not see much diversity during the sorority recruitment process. Members typically wear the same clothes and hairstyle, and advertisements for the sorority (videos, photos, flyers, etc.) usually do not show any minority women. Stereotypes and unconscious biases often occur during the recruitment process and can result in minority students not receiving an invitation to join (Salinas et al., 2019). Additionally, Park (2014) found that fraternity and sorority life was the least diverse environment for white students and that the members of fraternities and sororities were least likely to have a close friend of a different race.

The Sorority Experience

Despite the issues of racism and discrimination, HWFS have provided valuable and positive experiences for their members. Sorority membership has positively impacted member's academic success (Bowman & Holmes, 2017). Overall, membership in HWFS has also been indicative of higher graduation and persistence rates (Walker et al., 2015). Many women have stated that making friends strongly influenced why they chose to join a sorority. Studies have shown that sorority membership has positively influenced students' sense of belonging on their campus (Long, 2012; Walker et al., 2015). Despite the positive impact membership had on academic success and sense of belonging, membership did not impact an individual's intercultural competence (Martin et al., 2015). Membership in a historically white sorority has been found to positively affect a student's overall success at an institution. There are notable differences recorded for women of color.

Colleges and universities have long been viewed as centers of liberalism in the United States. Fraternities and sororities have persisted on campuses as conservative spaces. Hevel et al. (2015) found that membership in a fraternity or sorority directly added to a student's

conservative beliefs. Although fraternities and sororities claim community service as a foundational piece of their organization, most organizations do not believe that political or social activism is the same as community service. Also, members may be okay with the status quo and not want to engage with political or social activism (Hevel et al., 2015).

Black Women's Sorority Experience

As previously mentioned, there is limited research regarding Black women's involvement in HWS. This subsection reviewed the literature on Black women's experience in CBFOs. Black women in CBFOs received the same benefits as members of HWS in regard to a sense of belonging/friendship and academic success (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jennings, 2017). Black women in these organizations have indicated that their motivations for joining involved seeking friendship and specified that their family and friends influenced their decision to join a CBFO (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Membership in CBFOs has provided Black women space to feel safe and included at their predominantly white college or university. Some women have found that their sorority has provided support that they had not been able to find elsewhere on campus. Jennings (2017) reported that membership in a CBFO increased the member's sense of self. However, the existing scholarship in this sub-domain is still limited, and more research needs to be conducted regarding membership's impact on student's racial identity development.

Racial Identity Development

Despite the limited research on sorority membership's impact on racial identity development, understanding literature regarding Black women's undergraduate identity development and Black racial identity development at predominantly white colleges and universities (PWI) is of critical importance for this study. Porter (2013) developed a Model of

Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women. The model places personal foundations (history, legacy, and strength) at the bottom. This is followed by the four processes of development – pre-collegiate socialization, collegiate socialization, interactions with others, and articulation of identity as the culminating process. Black women entering higher education have already had experiences that have impacted their identity development. Porter et al. (2020) expanded upon her 2013 model and added that Black women’s intersecting identities all make up the woman and cannot be discussed individually.

During their formative college years, Black women have noted that support systems on campus, their families, and other Black women influenced their racial identity (Porter & Dean, 2015). While Black women can find spaces where they develop a sense of belonging on campus, many of them are still disappointed in the lack of diversity on their campus, causing some of them to report a need to conform to the dominant culture of whiteness (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is based on the belief that racism and oppression are normal in American society. The purpose of CRT is to recognize how racism and oppression continue to be embedded in our legal, education, health, and other systems (Hernández, 2016). For Black undergraduate students, CRT helps explain how Black and white students can be on the same campus yet have entirely different experiences and relationships with the institution (Givens, 2016).

Givens (2016) discusses the *invisible tax* that Black students shoulder when attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and their engagement on campus. The premise of this concept is that student engagement opportunities are typically based on student involvement and

institutions investing and creating engagement opportunities. Black students feel as though the institution does not make these spaces for them and they are taxed to create their own spaces. Black students are the ones typically tasked with sustaining their community on campus. In conjunction with the invisible tax, CRT shows how Black students are already at a disadvantage before they even come to campus because the institution and its engagement opportunities were created for the dominant culture, whiteness.

Regarding fraternity and sorority life, CRT can challenge the notion that race does not matter when selecting who to invite to join their organization. Many historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) claim to be color-blind, which views racism as something historical and not relevant in the present or in HWFS. CRT can help HWFS recognize race and dismantle the systems and policies in place that continue to oppress people of color in their organizations (Park, 2008).

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought (BFT), created by Collins (2000), is a theory that can be used to empower and pursue justice for Black women that have been historically oppressed in the United States. This theory is different from traditional feminist theory because of its intersectional lens and focuses on the experiences of Black women in particular. BFT provides context to the experiences of Black women through four different domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

The structural domain explains how the institutions of power have been created and used over time to keep Black women down. The disciplinary domain reveals how the institutions of power (schools, banks, medical offices, etc.) use bureaucracy to oppress Black women and hide the oppression or make it more acceptable. The hegemonic domain portrays how the structural

and disciplinary domains have become acceptable in society. It explains how discrimination has become a part of the culture and ideology of American society, which makes it harder to resist or fight back against discriminatory policies and practices. Finally, the interpersonal domain explains how Black women must be viewed through an intersectional lens and as individuals with varying experiences and identities (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist thought is beneficial when examining the development of Black undergraduate women. BFT provides an intersectional lens like Porter's (2013) model. When used together, it further explains how Black undergraduate women have had a plethora of experiences before they arrive on campus and that their experiences while on campus will continue to impact their identity development (Porter et al., 2020). BFT is used to understand Black women's lives and experiences and provide context for the experiences of the Black women who participated in this study.

Black Student's Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions

Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWI) are not only undergoing the development of becoming an adult, but they are also experiencing microaggressions and racism on their campus (Griffith et al., 2019). Black women in the United States have had to challenge the *strong Black woman* stereotype, which portrays them as consistently strong, resilient, and never upset/bothered by anything. This stereotype minimizes the racism and sexism that many Black women encounter each day (Haynes, 2019). An alternative to the *strong Black woman* is the *angry Black woman* stereotype, which depicts Black women as loud and difficult (Corbin et al., 2018). Black college women are often tired of being portrayed as the *strong Black woman* as they cope with the microaggressions and racism they experience on campus (Haynes, 2019; Corbin et al., 2018). Specific policies and practices on college and university campuses

disproportionately affect minority students, particularly women of color. Black women are often ignored, or their experiences are trivialized by their white peers and campus administrators (Patton & Njoku, 2019).

Black women choose organizations to participate in while at college depending on whether they would be the only Black person in the organization. Some students join organizations centered around Black culture and movements (Domingue, 2015; Willis, 2017). These culturally based organizations are vital in creating support systems for women of color at PWIs. At times, Black students can feel as though they are forced or obligated to create these spaces because their institution had not. At many PWIs, it is evident that students tend to self-segregate and associate with students who look like them, increasing racial tensions on campus. Integration can help build trust, increase cross-racial friendships, and decrease biases (Von Bergen et al., 2020). Colleges and universities need to create structural change to help with integration and create a more inclusive community.

Payne and Suddler (2014) found that Black students at PWIs used bonding, code-switching, and individualism as ways to handle their day-to-day experiences. Bonding refers to students of color sticking together and having social experiences among themselves. On many PWIs, the Black community is close, and most people know each other. This closeness gives many Black students a stronger sense of belonging on campus. Code-switching refers to people of color conforming to the dominant culture, whiteness, and being successful and viewed as “professional” on campus. Some students do not feel as though code-switching makes them any less Black, while other students use code-switching as a way to protect themselves and prevent a racially charged incident from occurring (Apugo, 2019; Payne & Suddler, 2014). Finally, individualism is truly an intersectional way of viewing oneself. Participants in Payne and

Suddler's (2014) study spoke of how they viewed themselves beyond just their race, noting other more salient segments of their identity. This theme is common amongst various racial identity development theories and Black Feminist Thought and will be critical when examining the experiences of Black women in historically white sororities (HWS).

Social Justice Movements on Predominantly White College/University Campuses

As mentioned previously, many historical PWIs benefited from and utilized slave labor and also prohibited Black people from attending for many years. This history of racism and discrimination is still relevant and impactful to students of color today (Dancy et al., 2018). PWIs were initially created to educate wealthy white men, and many of the structures established 100 or more years ago are still present today and continue to disproportionately affect minority students (Burke, 2020).

Before the massive resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement of 2020, the majority of news media articles written about the movement on college and university campuses were primarily negative. These articles painted students who participated as having an emotional reaction rather than a well-meaning reaction (Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019). These opinions can make students of color feel unsupported and unwelcome on their campuses.

For many Black students, the racial injustice they observed around the country caused them to reflect on their own experiences, including those on campus. It prompted students to see how the country's issues at large can also be exhibited at their college or university. Additionally, Black students have felt that the campus racial climate reflects what they see happening around the rest of the country. Black students have also perceived that white students were able to ignore what is occurring and that, as Black students, they did not have that same liberty (Mwangi et al., 2018). This sentiment is related to the concept of being colorblind, where

Black students have to face the reality of the racial climate daily. At the same time, Black students believed their white counterparts could live each day without worrying about racial injustice issues.

When racial injustices occur in the United States, Black students often reflect on their own experiences and use the national movement to empower them to speak up and advocate on their college campus. Black students have been utilizing social media heavily to protest and share their concerns about their college or university. Social media has allowed Black students at PWIs to connect with others and find community (Leath & Chavous, 2017). Social media has been incredibly impactful during the last couple of years for various social media movements, particularly for the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020. During a global pandemic, people worldwide were able to witness the massive protests that occurred.

Black student activist leaders at PWIs have reported feeling as though they are providing unpaid labor to their institution by developing action items or plans to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some students feel frustrated that they invest the free labor and then paid university administrators can claim the ideas and work as their own. Students also have reported being disappointed when their institution only engages in performative measures that did nothing to address the structural systems of inequality and racism (Burke, 2020; Jones & Reddick, 2017). These findings are essential when discussing the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on the experiences of Black alumnae. Many students have called for the total abolishment of Greek Life. Yet, most institutions have made no move to abolish or significantly change the structures in place within fraternities and sororities. This is also critical when examining how the headquarters of HWFS address the issues of racism and discrimination and how they support and address the concerns of their members, particularly Black members.

Summary

Research on Black women's experiences in historically white sororities (HWS) is lacking, as well as the scholarship on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and its impact on students of color attending predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs). This literature review examined the scholarship surrounding racism in historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS), the sorority experience, Black racial identity development, and the impact of the BLM movement at PWIs. Racism and discrimination are still prevalent in HWS today, and with the increase of BLM, many HWS are forced to reconcile their past. The literature reveals that the sorority experience positively influences a member's academic performance and sense of belonging. Black women find support and a sense of belonging when in organizations based on African-American culture. As Black students, they feel a need to create these spaces and speak up about racial injustice. Chapter three discusses the research design and methods used to explore the experiences of Black women who were the participants in this study.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of Black alumnae of historically white sororities. This study also sought to uncover Black women's motivations for joining their sorority. This investigation used interviews to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference sororities?
2. What are the primary motivators for Black women to join National Panhellenic Conference sororities?
3. What, if any, impact did the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement have on Black alumnae perceptions of National Panhellenic Conference Sororities?

Research Design

Given the gap in literature and theory on the experiences of Black women's experiences in historically white sororities (HWS), this study used a qualitative research design (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Furthermore, this study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as the theoretical framework for the research design. CRT and BFT prioritize viewing Black women as individuals with intersecting identities and understanding their individual experiences (Collins, 2000; Hernández, 2016). This study was designed as phenomenological research as it sought to understand the experiences of Black members from their perspectives (Knaack, 1984).

Instrument

Upon obtaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), the researcher used a screening questionnaire to determine the eligibility of potential participants by asking their initiation and graduation year, age, and which sorority they are an alumna of. Then, the researcher developed 14 guiding questions using CRT and BFT for each interview (Appendix B). The questions were open-ended and sought to discover motivations for joining HWS, overall experiences in the sorority, sense of identity, and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on their experience. The interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded using Zoom's recording feature.

Timeline

The screening and guiding questions were developed in Spring 2021, edits were made following feedback from the faculty advisor at the University of Southern Mississippi. Since this study used human subjects, the researcher submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) in September 2021. IRB approval was received in October 2021. Emails to fraternity and sorority life professionals at the selected campuses were sent in November 2021. The Facebook post was made in October 2021. A reminder email was sent to the selected fraternity and sorority life professionals during October and November. Interviews were conducted from November 2021 to January 2022. Analysis of the interviews was performed from December 2021 to January 2022.

Participants

The researcher contacted the fraternity and sorority life offices of various institutions across the country. These campuses were selected based on the type and size of the fraternity and sorority community. The researcher sent an email asking the fraternity and sorority life professionals to share with alumnae who they thought might be a good fit for the study. The

researcher also posted an invitation for the survey on the NASPA Fraternity and Sorority Knowledge Community Facebook page. The email and Facebook post included a link to a screening questionnaire for potential participants to complete. The form asked for the following information: name, age, college/university, college/university, sorority, semester and year of initiation, and email.

Data Collection and Analysis

Selected participants were asked to sign up for an available interview time. Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview that participation was voluntary and that every effort would be made to keep their participation confidential. The researcher informed participants that they would be using a list of questions to guide the conversation, but that they were free to share anything they thought would be relevant or of importance in their experience as a Black alumna of an HWS. Participants were reminded that the interview would be recorded using Zoom's recording feature, but that all identifying information would be removed during analysis.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and then coded by the researcher. The researcher looked for common themes throughout the transcriptions. The narratives of the participants were shared based on the themes that were named from reading the transcripts of the interviews.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of Black alumnae who joined historically white sororities. A qualitative research design was selected using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework. All

interviews were completed between November 2021 and January 2022, and analysis was completed in January 2022.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

This chapter reveals the findings from interviews with eight Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) Sororities. The interviews focused on their undergraduate and alumnae experience. Participants represented four sororities and seven colleges/universities. All participants graduated and/or earned alumna status between 2010-2020. Participants attended seven different colleges and universities and there were four different sorority affiliations, as shown in Table 1. All participants were between the ages of 18 to 30.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Sorority	University Location
Participant 1	Delta Phi Epsilon	Northeast USA
Participant 2	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Participant 3	Alpha Gamma Delta	Western USA
Participant 4	Alpha Omicron Pi	Northeast USA
Participant 5	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Participant 6	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Participant 7	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Participant 8	Phi Mu	Midwest USA

The findings of the interviews revealed the following four themes regarding the experiences of Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference sororities: (1) social belonging as motivation to join a sorority, (2) lack of knowledge regarding historically Black and

culturally-based sororities, (3) disappointment in organization's response to Black Lives Matter, (4) and uncertainty if membership in a historically white sorority was the right choice.

Social Belonging as Motivation to Join a Sorority

A majority of participants joined their sorority through an informal recruitment process and did not have an interest in the formal recruitment period because it did not feel like they belonged in that setting. All eight participants spoke of an initial lack of desire to join a sorority when asked why they chose to join one. Most participants mentioned that they decided to participate in the recruitment process due to persuasion from their friends or other acquaintances on campus. Participant two mentioned:

[She] heard about the open bid [process] from one of [her] freshman group leaders, [who] was an Alpha Gamma Delta. She is the one that kind of invited [her] over to the house and then that's how I learned about it from there.

Other participants mentioned being invited by friends to come to recruitment events or being encouraged by their significant other to participate. Participant three mentioned that she had a lot of friends in Alpha Gamma Delta and during her sophomore year they asked her to participate in informal recruitment for the second time. She decided to participate so that “they leave [her] alone.”

Each participant mentioned that their desire for friendship and social belonging was the primary reason they decided to join their sorority. Most of the participants mentioned feeling “connected” to members and the values of the sorority. Participant seven stated:

I feel, like all the girls that I talked to were down to earth and real, our conversations were not just like surface level “tell me about yourself,” like, I felt like we really connected. And the values of the sorority, I felt like I aligned with. I felt like it would be

a good experience and that I would make the friends I wanted to make, and also be connected to an organization that has similar values to me.

Most participants mentioned that the conversations they had with members made them feel a sense of belonging. The informal setting through which most participants met with members (spending time together at the sorority house, going to coffee shops or for lunch, etc.) aided in them seeing themselves as a member of the organization.

Some participants noted that what they knew about historically white fraternities and sororities is what is often depicted in popular media; organizations that are extremely social and are one of the best avenues on campus to meet people and have fun. Some interviewees referred to a desire to attend social events and meet new people. Participant four believed that joining would be “a free pass to have friends and social plans and I'm going to join, so that I can have social plans, [since], I didn't have a core group of friends” at her university. Outside of their own organizations, members are also connected to the larger fraternity and sorority community on their campus. For some participants the connection with other organizations was a benefit. For instance, one interviewee believed that it was her connection to the larger community that helped her win a Student Government Association position. For others, the feeling of belonging was limited to their own sorority and not the larger community.

Lack of Knowledge on Historically Black and Culturally-Based Sororities

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with Black alumnae of NPC sororities is that when they decided to join their sorority, most had a lack of knowledge and understanding of historically Black and culturally-based sororities. Participants described a lack of education or push from their campus' fraternity and sorority life staff and council officers

about the existence and purpose of historically Black and culturally-based sororities. When most alumnae learned about the joining process for a sorority, they only learned about NPC sororities.

For some interviewees, they did not learn about culturally-based sororities until after they had joined their NPC organization. As participant six explained: “I didn’t know NPHC existed here. I was like ‘there’s Black people here?’ I did not know until my second semester, and I was like ‘Oh, I would have [joined] you guys.’” This lack of awareness was present among participants who joined through the formal and informal recruitment processes.

Some alumnae also described a lack of desire to join a historically Black or culturally-based sorority because the chapters were too small on their campus or did not have the same social capital as historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS). As participant four noted:

Black fraternities and sororities like aren't really respected, they're not big. People are like ‘What are those letters? I don't even know what that is.’ It's like ‘Oh my God, read a book.’ We are not the only people who exist on this campus, but for a lot of people that I knew, it was like that was just a world that didn’t exist to them. So, I knew that that was not going to be a route for me... I just did not see a Black sorority being a viable option for me.

The recurring theme in the interviews was that alumnae seemed to not understand or acknowledge the history of culturally-based sororities, their significance, or the reasoning behind their smaller size when they were undergraduate students. Once interviewees joined their sororities, their interactions with organizations outside of their council was mainly limited to the Interfraternity Council, which is made up of historically white fraternities.

For participant seven their decision to join an NPC sorority instead of a culturally-based one is because she felt she was not in touch with her racial identity. She stated:

At the time, I was not knowledgeable or in touch with my identity. I was like ‘What does it matter? My organization is just as good.’ I think if you interview more people from my chapter that were founding members, they would have similar thoughts about how they never saw an issue or any of the negative sides of being in a white sorority until we got out of it.

Other interviewees mentioned that their initial friend group on campus were mainly white women going through the formal recruitment process. Similarly, some participants even mentioned coming into their racial identity only after graduating.

Disappointment in Organization’s Response to Black Lives Matter

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was that most participants were disappointed in the way their national sorority responded in summer of 2020 during the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. This sentiment was also shared by most alumnae regarding their sorority headquarter’s response. Participant five described her reaction as follows:

Even though I have an immense love for Alpha Gam, our headquarters does not show that to people of color [POC] as much as they should, considering how many POC are actually members of Alpha Gamma Delta. So, during the Black Lives Matter movement and all, that they were kind of silent on a lot of these [issues]... So, I'm surrounded by a lot of people who look like me that were equally infuriated with our headquarters, because they could have taken more practical steps and they decided not to and were just politically correct. It has been an issue for a while.

Some interviewees, like Participant three, mentioned that this is “a turning point of you're either going to do something or it's like [we're] not going to continue to progress.” Others were not

surprised by the lack of response as they were already aware of the historical and current issues regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in fraternity and sorority life.

For some, their organization's response was ineffective and too late or contradictory. One participant mentioned that their sorority headquarters outlined a plan to become better in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion yet still recognized members/alumnae who were prejudiced or outright racist. Others mentioned that they had not noticed any significant changes since their headquarters' initial response to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Most participants expressed a desire for their sorority to do more to support Black members. Now as alumnae, some described still feeling out of place at alumnae events or gatherings, where they are typically one of the only Black women in the room. They also felt as though their sororities do not provide enough programming or support for Black members or women of color. Most participants expressed hope that their organizations follow-through on their plans, now almost two years later, and make effective change and progress in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

About half of the interviewees are involved with their sorority as a volunteer, either through serving on national committees or advising local chapters. For most of the volunteers interviewed, they feel as though they need to give back to the organization and make it better. Some stated that their experience and reflection upon their experience made them want to become involved as an alumna to help make their organization a better space for other Black women.

Uncertainty if Membership in a Historically White Sorority was the Best Choice

When reflecting on their sorority membership experience, most participants stated they would have weighed all their options before choosing to join a historically white sorority. As

stated previously, the NPC formal and informal recruitment processes at the participants institutions only highlighted the NPC sorority experience. As undergraduates, some participants believed that NPC sororities were the only option, and many wished they had known that there were historically Black and culturally-based sororities on their campus. As one participant stated:

I wouldn't [have joined my sorority]. I think if I had given myself a year to explore everything, go to information meetings for Divine Nine (historically Black fraternities and sororities), I probably would have gone divine nine if I'm being honest with myself.

Others agreed that they may have not made the same choice to join a NPC sorority had they waited to see all of their options, or if their institution did a better job at educating potential members.

Participants further mentioned that they could see a stark difference between the HWFS alumnae experience and the Black/culturally-based sorority alumnae experience. One interviewee said they were envious of the lifetime connection and involvement among National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sororities, and that she would have joined an NPHC sorority upon reflection of her experience. Some revealed that their NPC membership was a fulfilling experience while they were in college, but were unsure if they would have still made the same choice. As participant four noted:

I think, for the time that I was in college, it was beneficial because it did lead me to making friends and making connections. Do I feel like it's had this like profound impact on my life? No... I think that I would still be exactly where I am today, with or without it, so I don't know that it would have made a difference.

Three participants are actively involved as alumnae by serving on national committees or serving as advisors for local chapters near their home. The rest of participants were not involved or did

not volunteer their time for their sorority. For most interviewees, their sorority experience ended when they graduated from their institution or earned alumna status.

A couple of alumnae discussed some of the microaggressions and racism that they experienced as undergraduates and alumnae, that now give them pause about their decision to join a NPC sorority. Although their sororities extended them invitations to join, these participants felt as though their sororities could have done a better job at educating members on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues or holding members accountable for being racist. As an illustration, one participant discussed how when her sorority would attend fraternity parties, the music played was explicit. During songs that had the n-word racial slur, some of her sorority sisters and fraternity members would sing the word. She was hesitant to discuss her concerns with her sisters for fear of being attacked or viewed as an *angry Black woman*.

Summary

The findings of this study helped to answer the research questions initially posed about the Black alumnae experience in historically white sororities, their motivations for joining, and the impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement on their experience. The findings revealed a difference in experience between the participant's undergraduate and alumnae experiences and perceptions. The concluding chapter of this study presents implications and recommendations stemming from the presented findings.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black alumnae members of historically white sororities (HWS) and their motivations to join their organizations. This study involved interviewing eight Black alumnae members of HWS of ages between 18-30. Each interview centered on 12 core questions regarding their undergraduate and alumna experience. Through the interviews, four themes emerged: (1) social belonging as motivation to join a sorority, (2) lack of knowledge regarding historically Black and culturally-based sororities, (3) disappointment in organization's response to Black Lives Matter, (4) and uncertainty if membership in a historically white sorority was the right choice. This chapter discusses the findings, presents implications, and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

Interpretation of Findings

Many women choose to join National Panhellenic Conference sororities to make friends and to develop a sense of belonging on their college campus (Long, 2012; Walker et al., 2015). For Black women who attend predominantly white institutions (PWI), their support systems are vital to their personal and racial identity development (Porter & Dean, 2015). Most campuses with NPC sororities have a formal recruitment process that is structured and run by campus staff and student leaders over a period of multiple days. After the formal recruitment process is over, students may have opportunities to join certain sororities through a simple and less structured recruitment process, called informal recruitment. Comparably, the majority of participants in this study joined their sororities through an informal process. This evidence is valuable because it suggests that Black women choose to join HWS due to preexisting social relationships and a desire to grow and connect socially with others.

Most participants in this study were invited to informal recruitment events by friends and students that they were already connected to on campus. According to the literature, most Black women at predominantly white institutions choose to join organizations based on whether they center the Black experience and culture or be the only person in the organization (Domingue, 2015; Willis, 2017). This finding was true for most participants in this research, as many thought their organization was diverse or that there was another black woman or woman of color in their organization. Therefore, the findings obtained in this research suggest that Black women prefer informal recruitment events with HWS and join organizations that already have other black members.

Deciding Against Joining Culturally-Based Sororities

Black women join culturally-based sororities for the same reason as all participants: belonging and friendship. One difference is that culturally-based sororities provide a different level of support for Black women that is frequently not found elsewhere at PWIs (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jennings, 2017). At PWIs, Black women can feel a need to conform to whiteness if there is a lack of diverse student organizations (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). On predominantly white campuses, students in culturally-based fraternities and sororities have voiced concern that they are less of a priority to their fraternity and sorority life staff (Beatty et al., 2019; Garcia, 2019). For most participants in this research, when they decided to join their sorority, they did not know much about the historically Black and culturally-based sororities on their campus. Most attributed their lack of knowledge and understanding to there not being promotion or education from fraternity and sorority life staff or Panhellenic Council leaders.

On predominantly white campuses, students in culturally-based fraternities and sororities can feel as though historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) do not wish to associate

with culturally-based organizations (Garcia, 2019). Most participants mentioned that their connection to the larger fraternity and sorority community was limited to other HWFS. Some interviewees mentioned how fraternity and sorority community-wide events (e.g., Greek Week, Meet the Greeks, et.) were tailored for HWFS.

At predominantly white institutions, culturally-based fraternities and sororities are often significantly smaller in size due to the smaller number of people of color attending the institution (Kimbrough, 2003). During the interviews, some alumnae mentioned that their reasoning for not joining a culturally-based sorority is because they were significantly smaller than the NPC sorority they decided to join. This finding correlates with the other statement made by participants about their campus not making an effort to promote all organizations equally or to educate on the different types of fraternities and sororities on campus.

Black Lives Matter and Hesitation to Join Again

Black students at PWIs often feel disappointed in their institution's response to acts of injustice and racism or feel that the institution's response is performative in nature (Burke, 2020; Jones & Reddick, 2017). Most participants shared this sentiment regarding their sorority headquarters' response to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The findings aligned with other research studies (Burke, 2020; Jones & Reddick, 2017) in that some participants were disappointed in the performative responses that their organizations were releasing.

Some organizations of participants in this study did not have clear and tangible ways in which they were going to address the systemic and structural issues of racism and discrimination in their organization. Many participants had hoped their sorority put more intention and action behind their statements. Although most of the interviewees were disappointed in their

organization's response, they were not surprised as their organization had, in their opinion, failed to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts appropriately over the years.

Most participants wished they had known all sorority options on their campus and had thought about their decision to join a sorority more thoroughly before joining. As previously stated, most felt as though HWS were the only option at the time they decided to join. The majority of interviewees believed that their sorority experience was mostly enjoyable while they were still an undergraduate student.

Discussion of Theoretical Framework

This study utilized two theories as the framework: Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the intersection between race, the law, educational systems, healthcare, and other systems (Hernández, 2016). Within fraternity and sorority life, CRT can be used to examine race, racism, and inequities within the community. Most participants mentioned that their fraternity and sorority life staff did not promote or educate potential members on all of the fraternities and sororities on their campus, specifically culturally-based fraternities and sororities. There was also no education provided from their sorority headquarter staff on culturally-based sororities during their new member education process. Some participants also mentioned how many fraternity and sorority community events were tailored to the needs of historically white fraternities and sororities and not all. In addition to the lack of education, some participants mentioned how they were one of few women of color in their sorority. CRT can be used to examine the lack of diversity within historically-white sororities (HWS) due to practices in policies in place that might limit other women of color from joining.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is used to examine the experiences and development of Black women through four domains – structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal Collins (2000). Along with CRT, BFT can also be used to examine the policies and practices that are in place within HWS that may limit Black women from joining or create a different sorority experience for Black women. Each participant mentioned that other Black students and family members questioned their decision to an HWS instead of a culturally-based sorority, but the interpersonal domain views every Black woman as an individual with different lived experiences and identities (Collins, 2000).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study suggest that there needs to be more education on and promotion of culturally-based fraternities and sororities prior and during formal recruitment processes. Participants spoke of having a lack of knowledge regarding the culturally-based sororities on their campus, and most now wish that they had known all of their options before deciding to join a sorority. To ensure equity for all fraternities and sororities on campuses, fraternity and sorority life campus and headquarters staff should examine the education they provide to potential and active members.

Majority of participants stated that even after joining their sororities, their interactions with the larger fraternity and sorority community were limited to other predominantly white fraternities and sororities. Some participants mentioned feeling out of place in the larger predominantly white fraternity and sorority community. A study by Garcia (2019) also showed that members of Latinx fraternities and sororities felt as though they did not belong in the larger community. Memberships in historically white fraternities and sororities do not have a positive impact on members' intercultural competencies (Martin et al., 2015). Therefore, college and

university staff could explore opportunities to build a stronger sense of community within fraternity and sorority life, so that all chapters feel a sense of belonging and feel supported. This goal could be accomplished through a common office-sponsored new member education, educational opportunities for current members, roundtables with leaders from a variety of chapters to discuss current issues, or informal team-building opportunities for members across all chapters.

Many participants discussed how their membership experience was limited to their four years of undergraduate education. Some participants are involved on a national level, but most said they do not feel a sense of belonging to their sorority on a national level as Black women. It would be beneficial for Black members if headquarters staff developed meaningful opportunities for Black members to connect and support one another. Another avenue to explore for headquarters staff is to develop educational opportunities for undergraduate and alumnae members that increases cultural competency. Finally, headquarters should explore the policies and practices they have in place that may be limiting the opportunity for Black women and other women of color to join. They could also develop new policies and practices that would enhance the experience for undergraduate and alumnae members. These practices could address the uncertainty participants had regarding their decision to join.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study outside of the researcher's control. Limitations for this study include the number of participants and the fact that their experiences cannot speak to all other current and alumnae members. This study initially sought to find 10-15 undergraduate participants at private colleges and universities in the Northeast United States. Although over two dozen schools were contacted, the researcher was only able to interview one

participant who met the criteria. It was difficult to recruit a substantial sample size from that population, so the study expanded to young alumnae across the United States. The population of Black alumnae within historically white sororities is small, so future researchers should anticipate to spend a significant amount of time recruiting participants for their studies. Lastly, it is important to disclose that the researcher is a bi-racial Black alumna of a National Panhellenic Conference sorority and may enter this research with pre-existing assumptions, perceptions, and experiences related to the questions examined in this study.

Future studies should be done to further explore the experiences of Black women in historically white sororities. Future researchers should take the size of the population into consideration and the time it can take to recruit participants. Ideally, future studies would be quantitative so that the findings can be generalized for the population. Further exploration into the Black experience would hopefully benefit Black women who decide to join historically white sororities.

Conclusion

The experiences of Black alumnae in historically white sororities are unique to each woman. The study explored the motivation for each participant to join, their perceptions regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, and whether they would still choose to join their sorority. The most notable finding of this study is that Black women found their undergraduate sorority experience to be beneficial at that time, but upon further reflection on their experiences, they may not make the same decision to join again.

Colleges, universities, and sorority headquarters should explore a variety of avenues to create a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable fraternity and sorority experience, and seek opportunities to increase the cultural competency of members. Further research into the

experiences of Black women should increase awareness and scholarship on this subject. Black members of historically white sororities deserve to have an experience that is enjoyable and beneficial for more than their four years of undergraduate education.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 21-052
PROJECT TITLE: Black Women's Experiences in Historically White Sororities at Private Colleges and Universities in the Northeast
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Educational Research & Administration
RESEARCHERS: PI: Shaleeah Smith
Investigators: Smith, Shaleeah~Krsmanovic, Masha~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 20-Oct-2021 to 19-Oct-2022

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX B

Interview Guiding Questions

1. How did you learn about Panhellenic Sorority recruitment?
2. What made you decide to participate in sorority recruitment?
3. If you went through formal recruitment, what was the experience like for you?
 - a. I.e. registration, recruitment counselor groups, connection with other PNMs?
Feelings?
4. If you went through informal recruitment (continuous open bidding/COB), describe your experience.
5. What made you choose to accept the bid from your sorority?
6. Are you a legacy of any sorority?
 - a. If a legacy of NPHC sorority, how did your family react to you joining an NPC sorority?
7. Describe your new member experience?
8. How did you bond with your pledge class?
9. Describe any feelings or thoughts you had while learning about the sorority.
10. How did you bond with older members?
11. What, if any, impact has sorority membership had on your social life on campus?
 - a. Can be inclusive of leadership positions/membership in other campus orgs.
12. How has your sorority membership impacted your personal development?
 - a. Leadership, sense of purpose/self, confidence, etc.
13. In what ways have you felt a sense of belonging within your sorority? Within the fraternity and sorority community?

14. Over the past year and a half, we have seen many racial injustices and calls for reform, including within the fraternity and sorority community. How, if at all, has this impacted your experience?
 - a. How has the organization reacted to BLM/injustices?
 - b. Has your sorority experience changed as a result of these movements?
15. Have you ever experienced or witnessed discrimination or racism as a member of your chapter? Either by your sister or other members in the FSL community?
16. Knowing what you know now, and having had the experiences that you've had, would you still make the same decision to join an NPC/historically white sorority?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add about your sorority experience?