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The Sorority Priority: The Role of Interactional Feedback Mechanisms in Shaping Body Image in Sororities

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The Sorority Priority
The Role of Interactional Feedback Mechanisms in Shaping Body Image in Sororities

Presented to the Honors Committee of
University of North Georgia

by
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Dahlonega, GA
May 2013

Accepted by the Honors Faculty

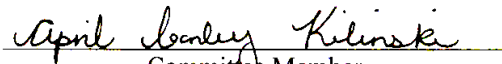
of the

University of North Georgia

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of
Science



Thesis Director



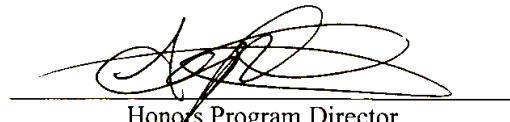
Committee Member



Committee Member



Committee Member



Honors Program Director

“Everyone has an image on this campus and you have to live up to it”-Sadie

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Introduction

From the time we are born, society has already laid out a set of expectations for us. These expectations dictate the manner in which we should act and look. At first, it is somewhat easy to meet these expectations and satisfy those around us. We are born into a family unit of individuals who are already accustomed to the “rules.” These individuals will paint our bedrooms blue or pink; they will dress us in different ways according to our gender. We learn quickly what to do and what not to do in our family units. As we get older, life becomes more complicated. Many of us join new groups beyond our family unit. Often, these groups have very different expectations from those taught by our family. For example, girls will join sororities and find their ideas about body image and the way they present themselves changing. But how do values and actions change as a result of these new encounters? This process can be explained through a number of theories from different disciplines; the present study uses identity change theory to explore this phenomenon.

The way in which identities change has been widely researched and debated. Identity theory is one of the more popular theories among social scientists to help conceptualize these changes. The theory of identity change (Identity Control Theory) was formulated by sociologist Peter Burke and has been used to observe urban identity (Reitzes 1986), self-esteem (Jaret 2005), and gender dynamics (Maurer 2001) to name a few.

It is important to remember there are many other ways identity change can be observed, and there are many identities this theory can be applied to. This study, however, uses this theory to research the way in which body image standards change as a result of joining a sorority. Body image identity standards for US women are currently defined by a slim body type (Haworth-Hoepfner 2000), perfection (Hewitt 2005) and the never-ending need for weight loss (Lähteenkorva 2001).

By studying these identity standards within a specific social context, it is easier to observe how they change and develop over a period of time. This study observes body image standards within a social group of sorority members. Of course, there are many other complicated factors connected to the construction of body image identity, not only inside the sorority groups, but also, in larger society. These outside forces include over-lapping identities and external influences. These forces are important to the creation of identities; however, this study looks at feedback as the main form of social interaction that contributes to identity change.

The goal of this study was to observe the way in which body image identities are reshaped among sorority girls through feedback mechanisms. This feedback helps to encourage certain standards or discourage behaviors that are not conducive to those standards. There are two internal influences which use feedback in order to create change, interpersonal and institutional. Interpersonal influences include the feedback given from sister to sister, and institutional influence is the feedback given by the sorority itself. To date, the literature mostly reflects interpersonal feedback mechanisms that could lead to changing identities. The literature review reflects the existence and effect of interpersonal feedback; however, this study found that there may also be a very strong institutional influence that could also possibly affect identity standards. This institutional effect has been neglected in most studies done on identities. As a result, this study does its best to evaluate this theme presented in the data. In the future, social scientists should take this into consideration in their data collection because it could provide a better understanding of identity standards. The study observes how negative and positive feedback affects body image identity within sorority girls. This will be observed by interviewing fifteen sorority members and doing a sociological analysis on the information collected. The

analysis aims to provide a better understanding of the transformation of body image identity. By studying a group of participants from different sororities, the process of identity change is better observed.

Identity Theory

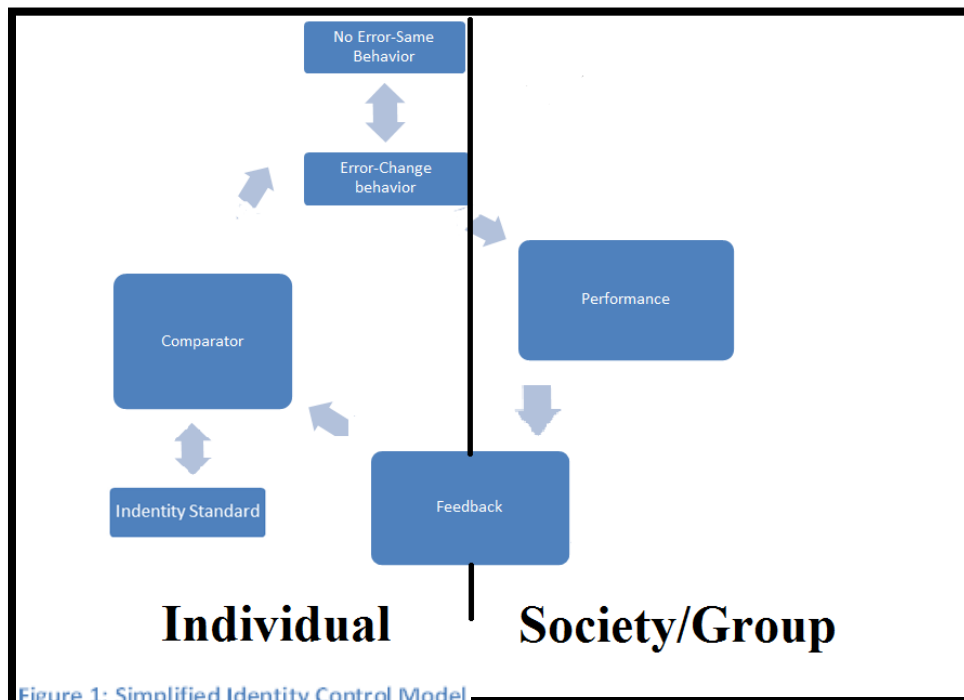
Identity meanings both emerge from and are perpetuated by different group memberships or larger social forces (e.g. stratification systems). These are the meanings an actor feels compelled to act on. An example of an identity is the ideas and beliefs a woman may hold regarding her duty as a primary caregiver of her children. So when this woman becomes a mother she assumes the role of the main caregiver of her children. However, identities are much more complicated and often contain several levels of meaning. Social actors frequently have several identities and these identities define how a social actor expresses himself/herself in certain social environments. The study of these interactions in different groups is referred to as identity theory. Identity theory is situated within a symbolic interactionist paradigm and seeks to understand the self through the social world in which the self is acting. By studying social life through identity theory, sociologists have been able to create a better understanding of gender attitudes (Presser 1982), ethnic groups (Sanders 2002), and identity conflicts and resolutions (Veen 2005). Identity theory can be used to study almost any part of social life. The traditional way of studying identity comes from sociologist Herbert Blumer. Blumer was one of the founding fathers of symbolic interactionism and one of the first to observe identity. Sociologists working within the symbolic interactionist paradigm have used symbolic interaction theory (Stryker 2000), structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980) and identity change theory (Burke 2006) to explain identities.

Blumer explains the creation of identity through an actor's need to satisfy him/herself. According to Blumer, identity is created in order to achieve one's goals. At work, an actor will act the way he/she is required to act in order to receive a paycheck (Stryker 2000). Blumer observes this give-and-take system in his work on identities. Jan Stets and Peter Burke (2002) examine Blumer's work. An actor needs to have identities clearly defined. If an actor does not understand how to act on an identity, they tend to look for something simpler they can identify with. So, it is important for there to be very gradual change between identities in order to avoid inflicting stress on the actor. Other researchers, like Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke, have approached identity theory in new ways, which help to explain this gradual transition. Stryker's goal was to study the effects of society on identity. For Stryker, society has a predetermined set of identities. Understanding these identities helps sociologists have a better understanding of social life. Predetermined identity operates as a framework which the actor can rely upon as a guide when choosing his/her behaviors and interactions within a social context (Stryker 2000). Other sociologists, such as Peter Burke, aim to explain identities through the group's interactions. By observing these social interactions, sociologists have come to better understand how identities change over time. Some years later researchers like Jan Stets began to focus on individual factors such as emotion. Her contribution led to a rethinking of the driving force behind creating and maintaining identities. Stryker and Burke explain these views on identity theory in their article *The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory*:

“Identity theory has evolved in two somewhat different but closely related directions. Both are instantiations of a theoretical and research program labeled structural symbolic interactionism, whose goal is to understand and explain how

social structures affect self and how self affects behaviors. The first aspect, however, concentrates on examining how structure of the self-influences social behavior, whereas the second concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these affect social behavior”(Stryker 2000).

Each of these views of identity has several criticisms. Sociologists Burk, Stats and Stryker observe several of these issues. Focusing primarily on social structures often neglects the interdynamics of a group and how it creates identity. Looking only at the effects of interactional dynamics within a group leaves out the overall effect of society on the identity (Stryker 2000). Other sociologists, such as Karen Ceruloe, suggest the majority of researchers’ views and studies on identities are overly influenced by political change. According to Ceruloe, sociologists have shifted from observing nationalistic movements to agency dynamics. As a result, identity studies



focus mainly on gender, class and race. This intense focus drastically affects the ways sociologists study identities. Caruloe argues that because of this focus identity theory leaves out different aspects of social life (Cerulo 1997). Despite these drawbacks, each view creates a better understanding of how identities work in social life.

Although there are several ways of looking at identity, such as the ones mentioned by Bulmer, Stryker and Burke, each view creates a better understanding of how identities work.

Identity Control Theory

In recent years, sociologists have begun to debate how identities change. These theories have been used to explain issues such as urban identities (Reitzes 1986) , self-esteem (Jaret 2005), and gender dynamics (Maurer 2001). It seems that groups seek to change individuals’ identities in order to create a cohesive and submissive group identity. Sociologists, like Peter Burke, have studied how identities change and are maintained over time. He argues that groups work as systems that are used to control individuals’ identities in regards to the group. Identities that have opposing identity standards will cause conflict within the individual, identity standards being a core set of meanings that are attached to an identity. These meanings could entail “study habits” for a student or a “good work ethic” for an office worker. Identity standards help actors to navigate their identities by giving the social actor an outline by which to act within a particular

setting. However, actors often have many identities, and some identity standards may conflict with one another. When conflict between two identities occurs, identities often have to change.

Identity standards are extremely hard to change and are not limited to one group that an actor participates in. An example of an identity standard is childcare. Childcare is an action that is closely connected to gender. Both men and women learn society's expectations toward childcare through interacting with their parents throughout childhood. When they have children of their own, they will likely follow in this identity standard that they defined in early childhood. If each partner has similar identity standards, there may be little to no change in their actions. However, if identity standards of each partner are different then the actor is likely to change the way he/she defines his/her identity over time. Identity change theory helps to explain this process.

The process of identities change is described in figure one. This change starts as a result of responses toward a social actor's actions. The individual will put the group's responses through a Comparator that compares the feedback with a preexisting identity standard. If the action is defined as positive, the social actor will continue the action but if the action receives a negative response, an error within the individual will occur. When an error occurs, the social actor will change his/her actions and over time, possibly his/her identity. Burke explains this process in his article *Identity Change* as follows:

“The error or discrepancy between the perceptions and the identity standard not only governs behavior, but also produces an emotional response. We feel distress when the discrepancy is large or increasing; we feel good when the discrepancy is small or decreasing. These emotional responses provide some motivation for reducing any discrepancies between perceptions and the standard, and in general keeping them small”.

When individuals change their actions for a certain amount of time they automatically start making decisions based on what other actors in the group think of them. After a while, the identities will change permanently. This change occurs slowly over time and is created through different forms of feedback. It's very rare for this change in identity standards to occur rapidly unless the individual lives in a society that calls for drastic social change (Burke 2006).

Body Image as a Facet of an Identity Standard

Groups often seek to change identities in order to create a cohesive group. Body image is one part of an identity some groups seek to change. Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll (2004) observed body image as a part of gender identity. Every group requires an individual to look a certain way. However, body image can be a very emotional issue. Some identity standards associated with female body image are flawlessness (Hoepfner 2000), perfection (Hewitt 2005), and success (Lähteenkorva 2001).

Body image is an extremely complicated identity. Currently, an image that is often connected to the female body identity in western society is the very slim female body and the ability to look flawless. Obtaining a flawless body image is expected in one way or another. Many studies on eating disorders have looked at the expectations of culture and status as a primary cause for body image conflicts. Eating disorders are often a way for individuals to achieve the culturally defined body image. Susan Heworth Hoepfner (2000) points out that there is a connection between women with professional careers and eating disorders. The most common reason given for the eating disorders is the high beauty standard put on women in order

to be taken seriously in their professions. In order to maintain power within their groups, women must obtain the culturally defined body image for their gender.

Although body image is often physical, there is a very social aspect to body image and the way in which it is viewed. A positive body image gives the illusion of perfection. Women look to achieve this perfection through exercise. According to Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt, exercise gives women the look and feel of being perfect. Exercise is seen as hard work and those who participate in it are hard workers. This perfectionism gives the actor the confidence that he/she will be able to successfully play his/her roles. Therefore, exercise is important when observing the perfection aspect of the body image as an identity standard because it provides confidence. Over time, exercise will be expected of the actor in order to obtain the perfection of his/her identity standard. The group defines how much exercise is required (Hewitt 2005).

Previous studies have also shown that body image is connected to power. Anne Haas and Gregory Standford (1970) observed the power dynamic that is connected with body image. There is a high value placed on body image in society. If an actor deviates from the normal gender identity, he/she is subject to conflict within the society in which he/she belongs to. Body image is a way of creating order in society. Therefore, it is possible for groups to adopt a particular body image in order to create a power image (Tsushima 2001).

In most societies today, weight loss is one of the most well-known characteristics of body image for women, in most societies today. Women are expected to think about their weight. For women, weight is often an issue of well-being and acceptance in a group. Sirpa Sarlio-Lähteenkorva found that although the main reason for losing weight is not only for one's health, losing weight is often also improving one's psychological health as well. There are several social problems connected with body weight. Weight loss is directly connected with improving one's social life and decreasing social pressures. The need for social acceptance leads to the creation of body image. (Lähteenkorva 2001)

There is not just one group that is subject to the influences of body image. Psychologists Kevin Thompson and Eric Stice (2001) explain the effects of groups on body image in their article. They specifically list body weight as an example of internalization of body image. They suggest that this internalization process is created by glorification of low body weight and maintained by teasing. Their research points to the main cultural factors connected to body image dissatisfaction. It is possible that all groups use these basic social reinforcements described by Burke to change and control body image standards. To offer a basic understanding of this process, the next section will discuss the nature of social feedback mechanisms.

Feedback and Feedback Appraisals

While Peter Burk mainly focused on the complexity of identity change and how identity changes through similar overlapping identities, this study will be primarily looking at identity standards and social feedback mechanisms. Feedback mechanisms are forms of social interaction that seek to encourage improvements in the group. Different forms of feedback are discussed in Burke's article. This study will focus on the implications of positive and negative feedback mechanisms on body image in sororities.

Feedback is what an actor receives from the group as a result of their actions. Each actor evaluates feedback differently. One of the first ways actors learn to evaluate feedback is within their families. This process of creating identities in the family is studied by Trent Maurer, Joseph Pleck and Thomas Rane (2001) in their article. Originally, the family creates an outline of what body image should be in their child through a series of learned feedback reactions. While

growing up a child learns how to perceive different forms of feedback pertaining to body image. Body image is an important part of a child's identity and creates a basis for how an actor interacts with others throughout his/her lifetime. While the basic components of an actor's identity standard are created this way, identities change over time. This change occurs when the child becomes part of groups outside of the family. These groups will seek to change identities in order to create an overall group identity. Valerie Shute (2008) observed the importance of feedback between students and teachers. She saw that certain feedback mechanisms like workbooks and tests encourage certain learning behaviors. She observed a direct correlation between feedback and the process of learning.

Sororities are no different from other groups in society and desire to change individuals (a change that can, over time, be reflected in identity standards). The nature of feedback is less important than how actors evaluate that feedback. Ultimately, only the individual's evaluation of the feedback will dictate how he or she will act in particular situations. The two most basic forms of feedback include positive feedback which encourages actions and negative feedback which discourages actions (Timperley 2007). The next sections explain some examples and the significance of each form of feedback.

Positive Feedback Mechanisms

Rewards in social settings are extremely effective tools for creating a functioning and cohesive group. Positive feedback communicates particular behaviors and role expectations and thus body types. This feedback encourages behavior and the continuation of certain behaviors. Positive feedback includes emotional feedback (Stets 2005), self-verification (Cast 2007) and affirmation (Handler 1995).

Jan Stets (Stets 2005) expresses the importance of positive feedback and positive emotions. For Stets, positive evaluations are one of the most powerful motivating factors for individuals to obtain self-acceptance. Feelings of approval and verification of existing values and beliefs signify to actors that their actions within the group are correct. Actors desire to play their parts as accurately as possible, and positive feedback mechanisms are used to signal to an actor that he/she is properly playing his/her part.

As mentioned, a very powerful form of positive feedback used by social actors is self-verification. Self-verification refers to the feeling that an actor has fulfilled his/her duties as a part of the group. Many theories suggest that actors constantly seek out approval for their actions. Jan Stets and Alicia Cast (2007) explain the process of self-verification in their article. Stet's and Cast's observations concluded that an important goal for individuals when interacting is the verification of self-values. Actors seek out confirmation from others regarding their actions. If actors receive positive feedback, they will work to maintain those relationships. For example, sorority sisters want other sorority sisters to affirm their body images. Often, they will shop with each other and talk about body image together while constantly seeking out approval of their valued identity standard. If person A looks for advice from person B they are looking for verification of their own views. Whenever their view of body image do not match those of the other sorority sister, change may occur within person A's original body image. This form of self-verification helps to support common values between sisters.

Affirmation of image also becomes very important when women assess their own body images. Feeling that their body image is acceptable is extremely important. The difference between affirmation and self-verification is acceptance. As previously mentioned, self-verification involves the group telling the actor that the actor has fulfilled his/her duties as a

group member. However, affirmation is when the group communicates to the actor that the actor's identity is correct and he/she has successfully taken on the group identity. Luran Avalos (2006) indicated in her research that women with a higher degree of social support are less likely to develop disorders that come along with negative body image. She also explains that women are taught to take others' perceptions about their images in high regard; therefore, feeling that their body image is acceptable is important.

Safety nets are another way in which sororities provide body image acceptance. The term "safety nets" refers to the support and acceptance that sisters give to sisters in a time of stress. Safety nets provide a necessary function for the individual. The safety net makes the individual feel accepted and cared about. If a member does not act the way that the sorority defines that they should, they will become outcasts of the group. Once an actor is deemed an outcast, other social actors will withhold this form of support from them. Safe nets serve as tools to form a sense of affirmation. If something goes wrong and a sorority member needs to feel like she matters, the sorority provides that support. In her study Lisa Handler (1995), explains that the safety net sororities provide can be very important in times of breakup, for example. If a sorority sister breaks up with a boyfriend, the sorority acts as a support system for the sister. This support system acts as the safety net that the sister can bounce back on. The safety net also provides a network of friendship and support for the sorority sisters. This safety net is an emotional reward that goes along with acceptance into the group and affirms the sorority identity of the actor. Sorority members become emotionally attached and assimilate into the Greek culture to meet their emotional needs. The safety net that is described by Handler is an important incentive that sororities use to persuade their members to uphold the sorority's norms. When there is constant negative criticism the individual becomes much less likely to conform and more likely to leave the group. Leaving a group that is supportive is a lot harder than leaving an unsupportive group. So there is an immense amount of pressure to conform to a body type that is defined by the group.

Negative Feedback Mechanisms

While positive forms of feedback persuade group members to change their behaviors, negative forms of feedback create change differently. Jan Stets (Stets 2005) evaluates differences between negative and positive forms of feedback in her article. Stets claims identities with positive feelings will be played out much more often than those that create negative feelings. These positive identities will become a priority to the actor and will be played out more often. If an identity generates negative feelings, it is less likely to be played out and will become less of a priority. Peter Burke also observes the effects of negative feedback in his article. In it he studies how stress can pressure identities to change in different ways. Negative feedback presents a stress on identity standards causing them to change. Actors seek to adequately play out their identities and if they do not, meanings of self in the situation are not supported (Burke 1991). Negative forms of feedback cause conflict and, in turn, cause change. The lack of positive feedback can be evaluated as a form of negative feedback because it denies social actors the reinforcement of their identity standard. Other forms of negative feedback include criticism (Avalos 2006), teasing (Voss 1997), and more indirect forms such as exclusion (Timperley 2007).

Criticisms are forms of communication that show dislike of an action. Laura Avalos and Tracy Tylka (2006) observed in their research how criticism helps to create disorders associated with negative body image. They argue that women who are criticized about their appearances

focus more on the appearance and less on the health of their bodies. Criticisms are a powerful tool for creating and controlling body image.

Other negative forms of feedback such as teasing discourage a certain kind of behavior that is undesirable to the group as a whole. For example, if an actor dresses the wrong way or attends a social wearing jeans when they should have dressed formally, the group will laugh at their choices in order to discourage the behavior. Direct forms of teasing may be used by the group in order to correct the behavior. This form of negative feedback is used repetitively until the sorority member takes steps to correct her behavior. Peter Burke (2006) explains this form of feedback in his research. For Burke, negative feedback is a form of conflict. If two identities hold opposing meanings, conflict will occur. The conflict can only be resolved when the two identity standards come to agreement on the same issue. Therefore, negative feedback seeks to cause conflict in order to obtain change. The reason teasing is referred to as a negative form of feedback is because it brings a person's original identity standards into conflict. Voss studied forms of teasing in younger children and observed that teasing is often a form of gender conditioning. Teasing allows for a group to enforce rules and norms that they feel are important. It is very hard to label behavior as teasing because it requires group knowledge of the situation. Therefore, teasing is directly related to the individual and is only understood by the group. When teasing occurs it is a sign of complete rejection from the group. This direct form of conflict causes negative feelings towards actions and the actor feels he/she must change his/her actions.

Negative forms of feedback are not always direct forms of rejection like teasing. Indirect forms of feedback within the group may also exist. There is limited information on indirect forms of feedback but they may play an important part in changing identity standards. Indirect feedback may not be presented in a clear form but is instead communicated in a more subtle manner. John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007) studied the influence of negative feedback on the learning process in their article. They briefly observe indirect forms of feedback and how they affect school children. This type of feedback includes not being invited to events, having ideas ignored or being denied benefits by the group. Often, these indirect forms of feedback are formed as a result of a violated ideal that is an unspoken norm within the group. This violation can include taking part in an activity that the sorority forbids such as drinking, dating another sorority sister's boyfriend, or doing anything that tarnishes the image of the group. When violations like these exist, the group seeks to change this violation by removing the problem. The overall goal of indirect negative feedback is to change the undesirable behavior without distorting the image of the actor who seeks to correct the behavior.

Modified Behaviors and Identity Change: Adjusting Body Image Standards

People change over time, as they grow and experience new things. Identities are an important part of a person's life and are subject to change throughout one's life. Identity change theory helps sociologists to better understand this change and how and why this change occurs. Actors change their identities in a number of ways. They can reaffirm or completely change their existing identity standard. The actors can even decide to avoid the change completely and leave the group. There are a number of ways in which groups force this change to happen in individual actors; however, this study focuses on feedback as a main cause.

The process of identity standard change through feedback is reflected in Figure one. First, the actor puts on a performance receives feedback and awaits feedback from individuals within the group. This feedback is then put through a comparator. The comparator is the way in which an individual compares their original identity standard with the feedback received from others. If

the comparator labels the feedback as negative then error will occur. When this error occurs, the actor must modify his/her performance or choose to leave the group. If the actor chooses to modify his/her behavior, the modified performance will lead to a completely different identity.

Modified behavior means that the individual's view of identity standards has changed completely and the way he/she acts in regards to that identity has changed. Peter Burke and Donald Reitzes (1981) observe the function of roles and identities. Identity is the concept of how one should act. Their study sees identities as symbolic in nature and defined through interaction. This interaction causes change therefore, identities are made to change and are extremely flexible to different situations. This change possibly happens in sororities in order to maintain a group identity) and because of close relationships between sisters (Lundgren 2004).

The desire to maintain group identity is a form of commitment. Commitment determines whether actors will accept feedback from others in the group. Peter J Burke and Donald Reitzes (1991) document a connection between commitment and role performance in college students. Without this commitment to maintain group identity, internalization of identity standards cannot happen.

Another major determinant of internalizing values is close relationships. David Lundgren (2004) explores in his research the causes of an actor's rejection or acceptance of feedback from others. In his analysis, he suggests that one of the main determinants of accepting feedback is the closeness of relationships with the actors giving the feedback. Without this close relationship, feedback is hardly ever taken into consideration.

Body image as an identity standard is changed in sororities through this process of identity change. By observing correlative group feedback on body image, the process by which it changes becomes easier to understand. As a group, sororities are normally involved in the community and have great influence within society. Their group interactions are very involved. The aim of this study is to better understand these interactions and what kind of feedback is used to change sorority sisters' identity standards.

Methods

Before the sorority sisters were approached, the researcher contacted the office in charge of the sororities for more information on Greek life. The research decided to use participants from the panhellenic sororities. PanHellenic sororities are organizations that are very old and well established in the United States. The participants were chosen from these sororities because these sororities demand a high level of commitment.

The participants came from a group of sorority members from five different PanHellenic sororities of the University of North Georgia. The fifteen participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty four years old and were mostly Caucasian. Each of the “sisters” had been in the sorority for over a year and were heavily involved within the organization. Most had taken up leadership positions or were very active members. The sororities were emailed about the study and asked if they would like to participate. The researcher then presented the project during a PanHellenic meeting held at the university. The head of each sorority sent out another set of emails to the sorority members. While most participants were recruited in this way, four of the fifteen sorority sisters were introduced to the researcher by other participants.

Given the complexity of identity change, this study used a qualitative approach to help tease apart identity dynamics. Sociologists have discovered in recent years that quantitative methods are only suitable for answering a very small percentage of the questions they are interested in. Jerome Kirk and Marc Miller (1986), for example, explain in their book that qualitative research can – under certain conditions – allow for better hypothesis testing.

Interviews lasting between sixty minutes and ninety minutes were conducted during spring of 2013. Each participant received two hours of community service and a gift from the school for their participation in the study. The interview questionnaire was created with the intent of operationalizing core constructs of identity control theory. The interview schedule was modeled after Peter Burke and Stephen Franzoi’s (1988) suggestions for conducting identity theory research. The interview questions were created with the intention of gaining insight into how each interviewee defined their identity and why. After the interview schedule was made, several practice interview schedules were created and reviewed by the review board and the sorority involvement office. After the questions were approved, a test interview was performed. With the help of some insights from test interview, the questionnaire was modified so as to better be able to answer the research question.

Some of the questions focused on participants’ perceptions of feedback they receive within their sorority such as, *“If a sister does something that the sorority doesn’t like, does the sorority deny them something?”* Other questions explored whether sisters have changed or would change their behaviors in response to positive or negative feedback from other sorority members (see the Appendix for actual questionnaire). The question, *“How do you think your definition of body image has changed since you joined the sorority?”* was added to the questionnaire during the end of the interview process. Although this question was only asked to a few sisters, it seemed to touch on a possible theme related to institutional feedback mechanisms which will be discussed in the results section.

After completion, all interviews were transcribed and coded in Nvivo 10 (a qualitative data analysis software). Using a mix of inductive and deductive approaches, the interviewee responses were coded to four major themes: body image, institutional feedback, interpersonal feedback, and behavior modification. The data were described using a constructive paradigm that allows participants to construct and define their own realities.

The primary focus of the analysis was to understand the different forms of feedback that are used in sororities and the effectiveness of this feedback. By focusing only on this feedback, many other competing and contradicting factors such as the ones observed in Peter Burke's research were avoided. Through qualitative research methods, this research seeks to better understand the complexity of feedback.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study will be discussed within the context of four main themes: individual and collective body image definitions, institutional feedback mechanisms, interpersonal feedback dynamics, and changes in attitudes and behaviors. The section on body image explores how both the sorority as a collective defines body image as well as the how the sisters define it by themselves. Both of these definitions are mutually reinforcing. The sisters will often borrow from the definition of the sorority and construct their own definition. This section will observe the standards that the group has borrowed from the sorority.

The second section focuses on institutional feedback mechanisms. Although the study initially only looked at the interpersonal dimensions of feedback, the analysis of the interview data implies strong institutional mechanisms through which the “ideal” body image is being communicated to the members of the sororities. The section on institutional feedback is broken down into two parts: encouragement feedback and discouragement feedback. The encouragement part looks at how sororities encourage certain behaviors while the discussion on discouragement focuses on how sororities stop unwanted behavior. Like the institutional feedback section, the interpersonal section is also broken into encouragement and discouragement mechanisms. By doing this, the interpersonal feedback section hopes to explain how feedback among sisters on a personal level shapes body image. The last section evaluates what identity standards (interpersonal or institutional) are being internalized or rejected. Finally, an attempt will be made to show how well these themes fit the model of identity control theory.

Body Image Definitions

In contrast to previous literature when body image was defined as the wish to obtain flawlessness (Hoepfner 2000), perfection (Hewitt 2005), and success (Lähteenkorva 2001) this study found there are two aspects to body image identity standard of a sorority sister which are body type and dress. Both aspects were described by sorority sisters as holding great importance in entering and maintaining membership in the group. Since both individual and collective definitions of body image seem to play an important role in identity dynamics, the following section will discuss (1) the sorority’s expectations of what the ideal sorority sister should look like (the organizational identity standard) and (2) how individual sisters defined their own body image (the personal identity standard).

The Organizational Aspect: Sorority’s Definition of Body Image

Sorority sisters described dress as being of great importance to the sorority as well as to themselves. Most sisters stressed that dress must be appropriate and very modest. Appropriateness and modesty seemed to be intertwined with how sisters dress. Outfits must cover specific areas of the body at certain times. During “chapter functions” (formal sorority meetings), attire must cover shoulders and all dresses and skirts cannot be a certain length above the knee. Sorority sisters also must cover their toes, and certain shoes are not allowed during particular events that the sorority sponsors. The following interview quote by Sam, a girl who has been extremely involved in her sorority, describes the sorority’s body image best:

“I would say my sorority defines body image as... (how) a girl can... pull off ... (her) body type so if you can dress well for your body type...that’s kind of our big focus, ...we are not interested in having everyone look exactly the same or the same size but as long as you are confident with yourself and you

can... dress to fit your body and ... put in that effort no matter what size you are.”

This focus on dress seems different from other studies on body image. There seems to be very little voiced interest in obtaining flawlessness in this sorority, although there might be actions taken such as dress to obtain flawlessness. Flawlessness as defined by other scholars is the ability to obtain a culturally-defined beauty which can be achieved through a variety of means (Haworth-Hoepfner 2000). In sororities it seems that this is being accomplished through dress. Dressing well gives sorority girls a chance to change their presentation of self and make their image appear more flawless. The research found that flawlessness is a quality that can be expressed by actions. The interviews suggest that this definition has made its way into the standards of sororities' ideal body image. When looking for girls to join the sorority, the sisters look for the potential to appear flawless.

Most sororities give classes regarding acceptable dress that the newer recruits must take. These classes seem to communicate the official identity standard. In these meetings, sisters learn which article of clothing including shoes, pants, and dresses are acceptable and which are not. Sweat pants, for example, are a dress item that is repeatedly mentioned in the interviews as not being acceptable wear in public. Some of the sisters also described taboos surrounding wearing other specific items of clothing like tennis shoes, boots (during certain events), and any articles of worn out clothing. Likewise, exercise clothing is prohibited during most sorority-sponsored events.

This set of expectations creates a need to live up to this organizational body image. In the interviews, many of the interviewees expressed a lot of anger toward girls who did not present the correct dress or image of the sorority. This suggested that many of the girls have internalized this organizational identity standard and use it in their own definitions of body image. It also seems that having this unspoken sorority standard makes it easier for sisters to teach other sisters what a good body image is and how to present it in different circumstances.

This importance of adhering to the dress code is beautifully captured by Britney. As someone with higher status within her sorority, she emphasized the need for other sisters to observe sisters who represent the sorority “in a good way.”

“This one girl, in particular dresses up every day, and she looks gorgeous every day, and she... has the cutest clothes... [she is] always complimented... and I love all of her clothes ... I feel like sometimes I should dress more like [her] ... she is in a position of leadership, as well...I feel like she represents the sorority well, and I look at her...I feel like...I don't represent that as well as I could.”

This girl, in particular, is not wearing jeans or a tee shirt. She wears dressier more business-like attire. She wears the right shoes, the right clothing and puts a lot of effort into her image. This work is recognized with a position and acceptance within the sorority. Britney expressed her feelings of failure to properly present this identity standard. Her description shows the importance of these identity standards to each sister.

Many of the interviewees also described a fear of being labeled the “ugly” sorority on campus. Understanding this labeling process is interesting because it shows the overall importance of body image as an organizational identity standard in the Greek life on most

campuses. Put another way, this labeling process connects the sorority's body image to the overall identity of the culture.

In the following quote, Amy was asked about body types; Amy stressed the fact that weight was an issue in her sorority. She put it this way: "It is ... an unspoken thing. No one brings it straight up [because] it is like [we] are the ugly ones on campus)" She explained that one of her friends from a fraternity said that his brother did not want to do an event with them because they were the "fat" sorority. In her sorority, it was something everyone refused to talk about with one another. Amy went on to say, "[Being] pretty, whatever it is, we don't do it so in the back of our head [we are always thinking about the] weight thing like if we [were] all a bit skinnier [it] would... help our image on campus."

For the sorority, body type and dress are the two most important standards that all sisters are encouraged to emulate. These standards are justified by the idea that sisters not only represent the sorority but they are the face of the sorority. If sisters do not live up to the sorority's ideal body image, they risk making the sorority look bad – which, in turn, reinforces the image of the "ugly" sorority.

Individual Body Image Definition: The Sister's Own Views

The individual definition of body image seems somewhat different from the sorority's definition. Naomi Ellamers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Dossje (2002) define the individual self as the way in which someone defines his/her self. The social self is the definition of how one should be in a group context. The social self can change within different situations but the individual self does not change. In this section, we explore this social self and the sisters' definitions of body image as it pertains to their sorority. The two aspects of the individual definition of body image was dress and body type.

Dress is an important factor for creating a particular body image. In the following quote, Britney was asked to explain what a good body image is to her. She defined a good body image as dressing well. In her definition, dressing well created a positive feeling:

"For me...to have [a] positive body image, I try to dress well every day. I don't want to...go to class in sweat pants and stuff like that because I just don't feel good when I dress like [that] just because I don't feel like I look good and looking good...helps me to feel better about my body."

For Britney, when other sisters dress well it is associated more with good feelings and confidence. This seems different from the sorority's priority which is to have its members represent the sorority well. Britney puts it this way:

"...just trying to put together an outfit that matches and ...looks fashionable and ... just [trying] to look put together and... [look like] I actually put an effort into it[ensures that I [will] feel better."

Given the centrality of body type within the individual definitions of body image, it seems possible that this aspect of the identity standard may originate from larger (Western) society. Separating previous socialization identity standards from newly formed identity standards can be difficult and, at times, impossible. These identity standards are deeply rooted in the sisters and some aspects of them probably existed before they joined the sorority. Sisters

who follow these standards are valued within the group. In another interview, Sadie was asked how she defined body image. She seemed to get very frustrated with the definition. After talking around the subject, she described body image as essentially a way for people to judge each other by looks alone. She describes some of the body features judge by others in the following quote.

“Yeah, the way they look, if they are overweight, if they are the stereotypical beauty, how their hair is, what they look like. It is a big thing in sororities. Certain sororities look [a] certain way. People just look at it and relate it to certain sororities. It’s just a thing”

In her statement, this stereotype has to do with weight, particularly being overweight. She described a history of having family members with problems and feeling that they have been judged. However, she describes a special kind of weight label in her sorority in the last part of the quote, “It is a big thing in sororities.” In the quote, she described how, among sororities, low weight is considered to be ideal and is very much encouraged. She also suggested that all sororities have a very similar definition of body image.

For Britney, her body image standard was similar to what she also described as being her sorority’s ideal body image. When asked how she defined a good body image and she went on to explain how part of having a positive body image is to have a certain body type. This very same body type was described as being an important part of the overall identity standard.

“Good behaviors and...good posture always look...lady-like...womanly...Obviously, looks ... having [such as the right] hair color and hairstyle...[being] a certain size obviously [is] part of it.”

There are many aspects of body image as well as actions to connect them together. Most of what was found in sororities was dress and body type which were identified as actions to connect to the body identity standard of flawlessness. This definition is created through social interactions with other sisters in the group. The sisters take on this standard within a sorority setting.

Feedback Mechanisms

A key concern of this study was to better understand how “feedback mechanism” relate to identity standards (with respect to body image in this case). While feedback was originally conceptualized in terms of positive and negative dynamics, the data analysis suggested a more nuanced and complicated picture. To better capture the themes that emerged from the interviews and processes that may contribute to changes in the body image (individual identity standards), the results will be discussed in terms of encouragement and discouragement feedback at the institutional and interpersonal levels.

Institutional Feedback Dynamics

The interview data suggest that institutional mechanisms affect most aspects of sororities and include the micromanaging of “bodies.” Peter Burke (2004) argues that social structures such as institutions and/or groups that require individuals to act out social roles verify identity meanings and provide justifications for actions taken by actors. He used this theoretical

perspective to observe the actions of urban dwellers and how they acted to being labeled as lower class. While the institutional feedback dynamics in sororities may differ from those observed by Burke the basic idea still holds. Sororities tend to have stricter social environments that have built-in negative and positive feedback dynamics. Micheal Hogg and Kipiling Williams (2000) examined a concept that could also explain what was observed in the interviews. Social identity theory, developed in Europe, looks at how larger social context could affect intergroup relations. An observation of this pattern is provided by Tom Smith (2007). In this study, the researcher looks at statistics of identity acceptance in different areas. Acceptances of different religious identities were higher in some areas than others. These statistics suggest that larger society sometimes plays a role in the individual identities.

The institution in this case the sorority seeks to affect intergroup relationships by using different kinds of feedback. This feedback can range from purpose statements, explicit standards, special events and organizational rituals, which are geared toward encouraging and discouraging certain types of body images. Encouragement mechanisms include workshops, weekly rituals, and standards whereas discouragement mechanisms include actions taken during recruitment as well as frequent dress checks. Over time, these “standards” can be either internalized or rejected by the sisters.

Feedback that involves different forms of encouragement reassures repeated behavior and teaches sisters what values are important. Helen Bernhard, Ernst Fehr and Urs Fischbacher (2006) explain that cognitive motivational process affects intergroup relations. The group uses motivational feedback to make people think of themselves and others in ways that are generally characteristics of the group. Recruitment is a time when this method is first being introduced. Recruitment is an extremely important time when sisters are looking for possible new members. Official recruitment lasts for about a week, and during this time girls meet different groups of sisters. It is an extremely stressful time for sororities who seek to attract a certain number of members. Sororities hold workshops, and most of the existing sisters go to them. During these workshops, they are presented with and reminded of the standards that their sororities value. The sisters are then shown how to look for these standards in other girls. Standards that are stressed are dress and how a girl’s body looks in her clothes. The girls in the workshops decide as a group which aspects of the body image are the most important to look for. Aspects range from hairstyle, dress, and styles of makeup. Several sisters described this process and its importance to them and their sorority. The workshops make sure they are all looking for the same aspects in potential new recruits. Sadie put it this way:

“We have our recruitment and recruitment workshops and that is basically when we are learning how to scout out girls ...we all want to be a presentable sorority both in academics and the way we look so. We do not discriminate against size or body type or hair color or anything like that. As long you can ... dress to fit your body...have a nice hairstyle...be presentable ... that’s ...what we were told to look for, and I think it is something people naturally look for when the girls join their organization.”

In this quote, Sadie describes how the workshops work within her sorority. Her quote illustrates how body image is to be evaluated, with both dress and body type as important criteria. Sisters are taught to look for certain hairstyles, dress and other things that the sorority values. T-shirts, jeans, worn out clothing and other standards of dress are to be avoided in scouting for new

members. Together, sisters decide which of these things are important and how to pick out these aspects in girls.

Before sisters get to vote as to whether the new girls are admitted in the sorority, they engage in a long process of discussion and selection. Each possible member is introduced to several different sisters and sisters grade each potential recruit on different aspects such as academics, speaking skills, and looks. All of these aspects are graded and the possible members are given an overall grade at the end of recruitment. During the workshops, girls learn how to grade and calculate the overall grade. Amy describes the grading process as follows.

“As far as body image goes, when they come through we have a voting process just so every member can say, ‘I talked to this girl and I really like her.’ ... We do rank them on appearance and ... usually ... on a 1-5 scale... five being super model ... and ‘oh my gosh’ ... three being average and one being ‘not the best’.”

It is important to realize that this voting process is a way for sisters to learn to evaluate each other. Sisters not only learn to how to evaluate new members, based on an organizational body image, but some quotes suggest some sisters evaluate current sisters the same way. In other words, this system of institutional “feedback mechanisms” not only encourages current sisters to focus on particular aspects of the body image, but it makes sure that only certain sisters join the sorority.

As previously mentioned, recruitment is a very special time and only happens once or twice a semester. However, the sororities make sure that certain behaviors are followed even during other days of the year. Weekly rituals and special times are set aside to “encourage” (reinforce) institutional standards. Chapters are especially important to their ability to function. During formal chapters, for example, sisters are required to dress up for the entire day. While sisters had mixed feelings about these get-togethers, the majority believed the purpose of these meetings is to make sisters look more uniform and more attractive to candidates. Amy argued the following:

“I think it is also a...chance...for us to all dress up and [it shows] we are all clearly in the same group and... I think it just gives a good image of our campus and our sorority. Our formal chapter just gives the image overall that we are dressed up and looking together when (we) are wearing (our) badge.”

The quote suggests that formal chapters help create group solidarity and reinforce identity standards; in this case, with respect to body image. During these weekly formal chapters, there are several other factors such as weekly awards that also reinforce the need for sisters to properly represent their sorority. While different sororities had different names for these awards, each was designed to award girls who dressed up, had the cutest outfit, or who showed up to the chapter looking the best. These awards would follow up with Facebook posts about the sister’s achievements. Most of the time, these awards are given exclusively to the sisters who dress well.

Other encouragement rituals included notes to each other during the chapter. During this time, the sister would pick a name of another sister and write a note to that sister. These notes could include things about the sister’s personality or activities, but a majority of the time, it involved encouragements about the body image. Often, the notes would say something to the

effect of, “you are so cute”, “you have a beautiful smile” or other compliments relating to appearance. In the following quote, Amy explains how this encouragement affected her:

“Each week we recognize a girl and ... [other sisters would] say ‘hey, good job on that outfit today. You look really cute.’ and it is not [always] the girl who is ...cute. If you wear a dress, even if you are bigger, if you rock that dress, you get the award ... we write notes to people and leave ... [them] on peoples ‘stuff’ because we recognize it is such a big deal. ...we...[want] to make sure everyone realizes that everyone is beautiful in their own right ... [we often hear] “they’re the ugly ones” from a lot of fraternities ... I don’t care as long as they have the best people that I can surround myself with but ... it is hard to hear that over and over [again] ... so we are trying to bounce back.”

Several of the interviewees experienced this weekly feedback, generally, in a very positive way. While some sorority members didn’t see them important at all, others looked forward to receiving their weekly feedback and actually kept the notes or awards they received.

Another form of encouragement comes in the form of purpose statements within the group. Purpose statements are statements that call sisters to participate in certain actions such as group activities, events, and meetings. While there are several functions of these purpose statements, some of them center on body image. For example, sisters act on these purpose statements by having exercise days, exercise groups, presentations on good health, and holf events on healthy eating. When asked how sororities define body image, Sam responded that weight and health were a big part of her sorority’s purpose statement.

“Part of our purpose is ... to develop [healthy body image]... so we really strive to be healthy and...satisfied with our body images, and we are accepting of others’... body images as welland we try to live our purpose...so I feel like we have a pretty positive outlook on body image because we have that right in our purpose that we refer back to.”

These purpose statements can be seen as subtle institutional feedback mechanisms because they are acted on and given legitimacy by the group as a whole. Several sisters described the importance of their purpose statements in regards to planning events. They described how the sorority planned activities around the campus. Since purpose statements encourage specific attitudes and behaviors and since sisters act on them year after year, purpose statements constitute a very effective form of feedback.

In addition to feedback that encourages, sororities also have built-in feedback mechanisms that discourage certain aspects of body image. Discouragement feedback is important because it is how groups reject certain identity standards. Judith Howard (2000) observes in the importance of belonging to a group and how this motivates people to be prejudice against things that they feel threaten their identity. The sorority uses this type of feedback to reject standards like dress or body type. While this type of feedback seems somewhat rare in interpersonal dynamics (which will be discussed later), sororities tend to employ this strategy effectively.

Girls who are seen as dressing well and presenting their body types the “correct way” are often asked to represent the sorority. While the other girls are given jobs that do not allow them

to interact with potential members girls labeled as “pretty” were asked to interact with the new members. This phenomenon was unexpected but it was brought up by several sisters who saw it as a problem with the recruitment process and a major discouragement for girls who do not get chosen. Sadie said the other sisters get “the pretty girls” to talk to the potential new members and “the ugly girls go in the back.” When asked how she knew this was happening in her sorority, Sadie answered:

“You just know. It is one of those things...Certain girls get picked for every party, and certain girls don’t get picked at all. The common factor is [they are] the skinny [and] the pretty ones ...the ‘ninjas’ [are sorority girls that] are deemed not as pretty as the other girls and [they are the ones that usually] set up everything ... [but] when [potential new members] come through [the “ugly girls”] are never seen ... the longer you are in [the sorority] the more obvious it becomes ... [During] your first recruitment, you don’t know your head from your foot ...[but] the longer you are in, the more you see it.”

Her description shows this is not just a phenomenon that is centered on this campus but something that seems to happen in other chapters as well. When further questioned if she knew of any issues with body image in her sorority, she described an incident where one of her friends was put in the back. Her friend was extremely upset and tried to change herself. Sadie stressed that most of the sisters knew this was going on. Not being chosen for important sorority functions acts as a powerful feedback mechanism because girls begin to internalize this feedback as negative. Lily, another girl, describes the process of selecting the “pretty” girls as follows.

“ [An older Alumni] said it once. I had a feeling she was doing it then I heard her say it bluntly one time, ‘...no, we want her to talk to a pretty girl’ and she wasn’t saying it to the entire chapter. She was saying it to the person who was our rush coordinator.”

It is interesting to note that so many sorority sisters said the reason for these actions was because the girls not chosen were not living up to the sorority’s standards. In her interview, Lily also said, “they want our sorority to be represented by the prettiest girls rather than ... someone who is not the best or the most desirable-looking by ...sorority standards.” While Lily was one of the “pretty” ones, she did not see this as an encouragement for herself. She felt strange and felt like it conflicted with some of the core sorority values. This sense of awkwardness was echoed by most of the other girls interviewed – in part, because they realized how it affected the other sisters who were not seen as “representable.”

In addition to the recruitment process, there are a number of other forms of discouragement that occur before and after the selection ritual. In response to members of other sororities being perceived on campus as being better dressed (and looking), some sororities have begun to organize make-up and dressing lessons for the sisters to attend. These lessons are designed to teach girls how to create a body image so as to represent the sorority in a better light. Sadie describes these efforts best:

“[Sisters are] recruited ... the second they come to the school. They are recruited the second they go through intro. They are picked out, they are selected and

harvested. It is amazing what people do not realize about [this] recruitment [process] ... [w]e worked our butts off ... At first, they would give us really blank answers, really service answers ... finally, it came out that ... such and such organization ... [sisters] were so pretty, ... so bubbly, so put together... [so] last night we had to go through workshops on hair and makeup [and] she [the Alumni] started calling people out”

Interviews with other sorority members show that before any other actions were taken, the institution first tried to “fix” the girl’s body image. Some sisters felt looking this way was a “necessary evil,” the only way to fill new member quota.

Another feedback mechanism that involves “discouragement” is dress checks. Dress checks are usually done right before recruitment but they can also be administered for special events throughout the year. The point of these dress checks is to make sure each sister is dressed in flattering clothing and they look more uniform. Dress checks are given by a board of current sisters and sisters who have graduated from the sisterhood. Together, the board decides whether each sister’s appearance is presentable or not. Chairs of the sorority often create themes, and the girls do their best to dress to those themes. Dress checks are a time for the institution to communicate to its members which aspects of dress they disapprove of. Sometimes, the board will only add a few things to the outfits, or they may require a whole new dress. They look for how well everything goes together, if it goes with the theme, and if the dress fits the person. At this time, the board members are allowed to give as much criticism as they feel is needed. Rituals are discussed by Wendy Faulkner in the article 'Nuts and Bolts and People': Gender-Troubled Engineering Identities. Wendy Faulkner (2007) observes how actors attach meanings to social interactions in order to create identities. In this case, sororities use dress checks to attach define what girls are acceptable and what girls are not. In the next quote, Amy, a former pledge class leader, describes how one of the girls she was working with felt after her first dress check.

“During [a] dress check, someone said something to me about ...[one of my new members] ... she said someone asked her if she was planning on wearing her Spanxs with her dress on, and she said ‘no’. They said if that’s the dress ... you really need to wear them and ... I remember, she came to me because she was really uncomfortable with that.”

After receiving this feedback from the dress check, this younger sister went to Amy for help. It seemed that the feedback had affected her so much that she had stopped wearing the dress altogether. To address the issue, Amy and the younger sister went to the dress board and talked about the problem. They worked things out, but afterwards, she still did not feel comfortable wearing the dress again. Being afraid of being singled out again, the sister began over preparing for dress checks from that point on. Other girls described similar stories related to finding new outfits or of having to send pictures to the dress board before buying a dress item. Even the more self-confident sisters will, after a number of failed dress checks, cave and address the problems pointed out by the dress board.

The discussion in this section shows that institutional feedback mechanisms centered on body image are an important component in the theoretical understanding of identity change dynamics. Sororities both encourage and discourage actions and thus, mold the sisters’ body image to their liking. Through workshops, weekly rituals, and explicit sorority standards, they

encourage and discourage particular dress and body standards. Together, these feedback mechanisms reinforce and teach identity standards valued by the sorority.

Interpersonal Dynamics

In addition to institutional feedback dynamics, body image is shaped by interpersonal feedback mechanisms given from one sister to another independent of their roles in the sorority. It relates to how the sisters, through a series of encouraging and discouraging mechanisms, construct their own identity standards with respect to body image. Previous research defines positive feedback as emotional feedback (Stets 2005), self-verification (Cast 2007), and affirmation (Handler 1995). The data collected here suggest that among sorority sisters, compliments and advice are the most common types of encouraging feedback mechanisms. As previously mentioned, with respect to negative feedback mechanisms, other authors have identified criticism (Avalos 2006), teasing (Voss 1997), and more indirect forms, such as exclusion (Timperley 2007) as the primary processes. This study suggests direct forms of negative feedback like teasing and criticism are more common.

For sisters, compliments might arguably be one of the most important and most common feedback mechanisms that they use. When asked, “how common are compliments in a sorority?” an overwhelming majority of sisters answered, “very common”. While compliments related to doing things for the sorority or doing well academically do get exchanged, compliments about body image were more common. Sisters are praised for the way they dress, their weight, their hair, and their makeup regularly. Compliments seem to function primarily on an emotional level. Compliments perceived as heartfelt feed on people’s already existing emotions. Stets (2005) stressed the crucial importance emotional feedback plays in verifying existing values and emotions. Stets sees verification (or affirmation) as one of the most effective feedback forms when it comes to the creation and maintenance of identities. In the following quote, Kat illustrates the importance of this feedback in her sorority.

“[It is] super common ... every day ... whenever we see each other, it is always ‘Oh my gosh! You look great’ [or] ‘Your hair is really cute’...We compliment each other all the time. ...I guess, to people on the outside, it might seem kind of annoying...”

Sisters know, either consciously or unconsciously, the importance of emotional feedback in their group. They feel like they want to belong, and this need to belong requires emotional feedback to show approval of certain aspects of their identity. One very common form of emotional feedback is compliments. Compliments are so common that many sorority sisters could not imagine not having them. Compliments on the body image are given to everyone including those sisters who are not on the best of terms with the sorority. Lack of compliments might lead to self-doubt. Beth, for example, said if she did not receive compliment it may lead her to approach specific people and ask them like, “Do they not like me, or what?”

Self-verification relates to the feeling an individual experiences if he/she has fulfilled his/her duties within the group. Interpersonal feedback is different from institutional feedback because it is normally performed by other members of the sorority. The article William Swann, Peter Rentfrow, and Jennifer Gunn (2000) looks at self-verification in great detail. Their study seems to suggest that sometimes people have a great need to make sure their actions are approved of by the group. This is why people in groups verify each other’s sense of self. Often,

it is the sisters themselves who provide each other with this self-verification. In sororities, compliments verify that sisters are doing the right things. Kelly, a practical girl who liked to give straight forward answers, described the verification aspect of compliments the following way:

“[Sisters are told they] look really pretty or [someone likes their clothes] It is more physical ... [these] compliments are more present in ... everyday [life].”

Without these compliments, sisters may feel like they are not doing the right things. They may simply continue to keep modifying their behaviors until they can get the desired reaction from their sisters. Britney also seemed to think compliments are very important, and said she had a hard time thinking about what her sisterhood would be like without them. She described the idea as being “weird” especially because she felt compliments are based on reciprocity. Here is how Britney described it:

“I guess that would kind of get frustrating ... because if you are always trying to compliment others, and make them feel good, and no one ever said anything to you ... it is ...a little bit upsetting [be]cause it is like I am taking note of them but they are not seeing me, and girls are always trying to be accepted by each other, and looks are one big way [of doing that].”

Several interviewees also described incidences where girls who didn't dress as well would also be complimented. They stressed, that with the behavior, there is an implicit hope this will encourage the girls to start dressing better. Rather than being an individual phenomenon, many sisters discussed how this was a group effort. When a sister who did not normally look good brushed her hair or used makeup one day the entire group would compliment her on her efforts. In some ways, these actions seemed to be very effective.

Using compliments for self-verification can also be used to prevent animosity in the sorority. The interviews suggest sisters are in a habit of constantly comparing themselves to each other including each other's body images. They often seek to see how well they are emulating the ideal that the group defines. This comparative process creates some negative feelings toward sisters who feel they do not look as good as the others. It may even encourage sisters to stop trying to emulating the sorority's ideals. Kelly, a girl involved in several activities on campus, described this process best.

“[There is] jealousy and comparing ourselves to each other ... [this can] bring you down as a chapter and bring animosity to the chapter. So, the fact that we are all ready to compliment each other and so ready to be excited for each other ... is really important with keeping us all feeling like we are a sisterhood and not in competition with each other ...”

Advice seems to be another important mechanism used to encourage sisters to do the “right” things. While advice can involve everything from educational to professional advice, advice regarding body image seems to be among the more frequent types. This type of advice is important within the institution because it gives sisters some direction in how to embody sorority standards. Advice affirms ideas and images and, as April emphasizes, it often involves a bi-directional component:

“I’ll ask what I should ... wear to something or ... what they think of an outfit ... they will be straight-up honest with me ... they will tell me if it looks bad or if it looks good... I had to buy a dress for an event ... and I took one of my sisters with me because I knew she was honest, and we were in the dressing room together, and I told her if [her outfit] looked bad, or she told me if I look bad [in an outfit].”

While advice on dress and body type – both key aspects of the individual body image standard - are fairly common, advice on body types operates somewhat differently. Dress advice is often straight forward and sisters are more likely to seek and take advice on it. However, advice on body type involves a much gentler approach. Sally, a sister who expresses feeling extremely passionate about Greek life and views her sorority as a family, conveyed a story about her positive experiences with advice she received on body type. After a horrible family tragedy, she began to eat a lot, and, as a result, started to gain a lot of weight. One of her sisters approached her about the subject and told her that “she was not trying to ruin ... [her] day or make ...[her] feel bad about ...[herself] but [that she was just really worried about ...[her] because [she thought] it’s just not healthy for [her].” As Sally’s story illustrates, this type of advice is approached very gently and often centers on concerns for health. Advice presented in this way affirms the sister’s current body image while encouraging new standards.

Most sisters are ready to give body image advice, and other sisters are equally ready to receive it. Britney said she would consider the advice one hundred percent of the time, and she thought most other sisters felt the same way. Most sisters went as far as to say that they would take their sister’s advice over all others because they felt the sisters had only their best interest in mind. When asked why sisters would follow this advice without question, Sam answered, “We are still sisters ... if you really care about someone you won’t throw them under the bus. You want to make sure that they put their best self forward.” For Sam, advice is important because it helps other sisters to “put their best foot forward”. To Sam, sisters use advice to make sure they look their best. She goes on to say:

“I’ll help pick out outfits ... [a sister] will take my advice...” Britney echoes this concerns for others, “... You don’t want them to think ‘Why is she wearing that dress? It looks terrible on her figure.’ You...don’t want to be that person [so I tell her what I think].”

These examples show advice is given and taken because sisters want to look “good” for socials and events. Overtime, however, advice becomes less important. The importance of the advice seems to be especially crucial during the first two semesters in the sisterhood. During this time, advice with respect to body image matters the most.

Unlike compliments, advice is not always as useful. Sisters can justify not taking advice if they feel it does reflect their own self-image. The usefulness of advice is also tied to other factors such as seniority and social status. If the sister, for example, is too young or if she is not in a state of power, her advice tends to be discounted. Sally explained her feelings and experiences in this way:

“I think, for the most part, they [other sisters] wouldn’t mind. I have a very straight-forward attitude ... [Normally] if I get advice that I am [not] necessarily one hundred percent... confident [about]...I will think about it. I will then state my reasons for ... [disagreeing] or whatever. ... [But] [from] what I have seen and experienced. I really don’t think any of them would take it personally ... I will tell them thanks for that [and that] I really think you have valid points.”

Although it seems sisters are more likely to use encouragement mechanisms to affect body image, they do use some forms of discouragement such as criticism (Avalos 2006), teasing (Voss 1997), and the more indirect forms such as exclusion (Timperley 2007). However, the research found these direct forms of discouragement are less common in sororities. Teasing and criticisms seem to rarely happen at least, in front of the sister being made fun of, suggesting that sisters tend to prefer indirect forms of feedback. “Offhand” comments are one of the ways sisters can take a more indirect approach to criticism. These types of comments may not clearly be directed at a sister and often involve a positive twist. Sally’s comment suggests this type of feedback “happens all the time”:

“I haven’t really heard [about] direct insults [being used]. ...If you are having a problem, you might tell your friend, and she will address it with the girl or something like that.”

The use of sideways glances and other forms of body language may also be used to express criticism. Smiles and sideways glances are very common, although they are normally expressed in private groups. At some point, these criticisms will be verbalized after going through a non-verbal phase. Amy, a girl with a flamboyant personality, was asked if she knew of any ways sorority sisters show disapproval. She answered:

“[There] are always ... glances and stuff...when you ..see a... girl walk in with a weird dress...[for example] You just...look and... smile. I am sure they see it but sometimes...it is like put some clothes on. [If] you can see their butt hanging out of their dress ... But I don’t think disapproval is really shown ...publicly. It is more [so] behind closed doors, talking to another [sister].”

Just like offhand comments, there are very few non-verbal cues that can be directed toward a sister. Almost all discouragement is presented this way. Often, these non-verbal cues maybe exchanged between other sisters before the sister not conforming or upholding these standards is approached.

Interpersonal and institutional feedback mechanisms are very similar to one another. Both are used to encourage and discourage certain actions. However, interpersonal feedback is performed by individual sisters by using compliments, offhand comments and other feedback discussed in this section. Institutional feedback is performed by the sorority, as a whole, in the form of organized workshops, dress checks, and other rituals. The next section will explore how effective these kinds of feedback are when influencing body image identity standards.

Changing Identity Standards

Identity standards are always changing. As previously discussed, identity changes are always evolving and this is often a result of the social environment in which the actors are in. In this case, the sorority members are given feedback, directly or indirectly, by the institution (the sorority itself) and the group (sisters). Naoi Ellmers explains it is not necessary to decide whether the institution or the collective self is more important. Rather, it is more important to understand which takes precedence over the other (Naoi Ellmers 2002). This section will explore these issues, as well as the effectiveness of this feedback, and discuss how the observations of this study compare to the model of identity control theory (Burke 2006).

Internalized Institutional Standards

The influence of the sorority, as an institution, is important, and the interviews suggest this feedback is effective when it comes to changing the body image of its members. Yan Chen and Sherry Xin (2009) observe the influence of group preference. Group preference (or the main group we identify ourselves with) has a strong influence on the way we act. One of the quotes that best illustrates the effectiveness of institutional feedback comes from Amy. Amy describes her friend as a nice, hard-working individual but also, one who doesn't like to wear a lot of makeup or take the time to style her hair. She does a lot for the sorority but is not the "best looking" sister in the group. In the following quote, Amy referring to her friend as "Cup" and explains the type of influence the sorority has on her feelings about Cup.

"Sometimes, they will get mean and I [will say]...'Cup was at all the events last week, and she made us cookies for chapter...That was really sweet. Redeeming qualities!' Then they will ... [say] 'it doesn't matter'. So, I just don't say anything, which is not good ... I just don't want to put myself in a bad place because I [will be] here for the next four years ... you can escape people but you can't escape the chapter ... You are around them all the time."

Much of a sorority sister's identity is connected to the sorority itself, and sisters look to the sorority for feedback. While the sorority as an institution uses a number of feedback mechanisms to encourage and discourage behaviors, the interviewed sisters said that only two are truly effective: standards and dress checks.

Standards in the sorority teach the sisters how they should dress and look. There is an extreme loyalty to these standards. Almost all the sisters said that the standards were fair, and they could not think of any ways to improve them. Most sisters felt that following these standards showed respect for an organization that was much bigger than themselves. Doing things like dressing up was their way of showing respect for the sorority. When asked why certain aspects of dressing up were so important to the sorority, Sadie answered in a very matter of a fact way:

"I am not going to pay to be a part of something I do not respect. You dress up for things you respect. You wear sweat pants to things that you do not care about."

Other sisters echoed these sentiments when they referred to standards of dress during their events. Some described the irritation they felt with girls who do not represent their sorority

well. When asked why this irritated them they said these girls were a reflection of them and all of the other chapters around the nation. Therefore, when one sister looks bad, it makes the entire sisterhood look bad. When asked if conforming to these standards was a form of pride Sarah, struggling, to answer this question, after several minutes, answered:

“It's hard to describe; I don't care if you roll out of bed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, but if you're going to be wearing something that represents an organization that I'm a part of, ... I take ... pride in ..., ...respect..., and ...honor ..., and ... [try to] represent ...[it] positive[ly], then I expect you to do the same...If you're going to wear the letters to represent your part in the organization, then you need to act in a respectable manner, and show that you respect the organization and are a woman of these values, just like I am. Because if you're a woman in this organization in those letters and you're acting that way, that's a reflection of me, too.”

When sisters feel they are representing the whole sorority, it shows just how deeply the sorority's standards have been internalized. These standards seemed to be of such importance that some felt that, without them, the sisters would dress any way they want, and this would be a bad reflection on everyone in the sorority. Most people justified these standards by saying they were necessary. When asked if she would change the standards, Susan answered in a very low voice:

“I don't think so because these standards make sure we don't dress sloppy while we are representing our sorority. If we didn't have these standards, people would be out there in sweat pants going to chapter with their hair up in a bun like mine is right now. They wouldn't respect it ... if there were not any guidelines.”

Most sisters rationalized these standards in very similar ways. Like Susan, most sisters felt that these guidelines (“standards”) were the only way of upholding the body image ideal of the sorority. The fact that most sisters would adhere to the standards in the future suggests these standards have been fully internalized and incorporated into their overall identities.

Internalized Group Standards

Although institutional feedback is very effective, interpersonal feedback seems to be just as effective if not more so. Most of the sisters acknowledged that their body image has changed since they joined the sorority. Reasons as to why this is the case ranged from “I have become more aware of what I would like to change” to “I am more concerned about weight and dress.” These answers suggest the identity standards change due to comparative processes; sisters evaluate their body images with those of other sisters. Amy's case is important here because it stresses the importance of the group on her views on body image:

“My perception of [body image] is [comes from what other] people on this campus [find] more socially acceptable...[for example] the girls who are more popular, what they look like ... is the ideal body image. So [my idea of body

image] is formed by the opinions of other people around me, and, then I just adapt it to [my original idea].”

The process that she describes here is very interesting because body image standards seem to change as sisters interact and compare themselves to each other. Individual sisters will modify their behaviors to match what the sorority or institution would want. They give compliments on based on what they feel the sorority is looking for, and they discourage behaviors that are not in line with those values. This feedback seems to have a profound effect on how sisters shape their personal views on body image and how they see themselves as it relates to body image.

Rejecting Standards

Most sisters seem to feel a very strong connection to their sorority. When asked about sisters who had left the sorority, many the interviewees became upset or describe them as being “immature.” They argued there are only very few justifiable reasons for someone to leave the sorority, such as financial problems or other “extreme” circumstances. However, studies like the one by Henri Tajfel and John Turner have observed the fact that actors seek to achieve positive identity. Positive identity can be achieved through several favorable in-group interactions. However, If this positive identity cannot be achieved, the actor will either leave the group, join another group, or change their group altogether (Turner 2004.) This same observation was made in this study. In the following quote, Sally explained her feelings regarding negative identity:

“If I was constantly [being] criticized, [I would probably leave] ... because I don’t want [to feel] constantly put down but ... [healthy criticisms about] bettering the chapter and bettering yourself [are okay]...we would not criticize people to be mean or put them down or anything ... [we] always [stress to] better the chapter and better the person.”

While criticisms about the body are rarely seen as a justifiable reason for leaving the sorority, sisters often see it as a reason for them to “improve”. Many sisters defended criticism as force for positive change. Others, however, were more explicit by saying that if the criticism was directed at their weight or other body image factors, they might leave. Since the connection with the sorority is often strong, sisters tend to first seek ways to change themselves before leaving the sorority. Sisters will rarely reject values to the point of leaving; however, it seems that it is more common for the sisters negotiate their “own” standards that re-interprets these institutional standards in particular ways including the rejection of some practices. For example, a few sisters felt the sorority’s body image was unobtainable. They saw dressing well and being healthy as important but rejected the idea of having to look like the ideal sorority girl every day, although this failure to live up to the standard often created a sense of guilt. Some would even reject the idea altogether and only hold up the sorority’s ideal image during special events.

Several of the girls in the interviews had this problem. Britney, in particular, talked about how her sorority’s feelings affected her. In the interview, she explained that she worked every day and had always taken a full semester load of classes. To her, this was not a realistic way of maintaining her image in the sorority. She understood that her sorority wants every sister “to have an hour routine” every day before they leave their room to make sure everyone is in “tip-top” shape. However, she stressed that she didn’t do that. Her example shows that sisters do

negotiate the standards by picking and choosing what is important to them. All of the sisters in this interview expressed love for the sorority and their fellow sisters. However, there was an air of frustration when it came to their sorority's definition of body image and what they were expected to do to embody this image.

Applying the Model

Peter Burke's (Burke 2006) model of identity change assumes social actors provide continuous feedback on performances. Depending on the type, individuals will evaluate this feedback with their original identity standards. If the individual perceives a mismatch between the feedback and his/her own identity standard (the error in the model), the individual will try to modify his/her behavior. The research in this study added an additional component to Burke's more micro-level model: an institutional actor, in this case the sorority (see figure 2). The sorority seems to shape group dynamics because sisters tend to evaluate the institutional feedback together. They will then decide how to translate their own interpretations into specific daily performances. Since sororities are nationwide institutions, their values are decided by the chapter. Chapters tend to be more isolated and can therefore interpret the institutional standards on their own. The group then uses interpersonal feedback to act on these institutional standards. Once the sister has put this feedback through the comparator (the way in which actors compare existing identity standards to feedback being received), it is likely that she will modify her behavior.

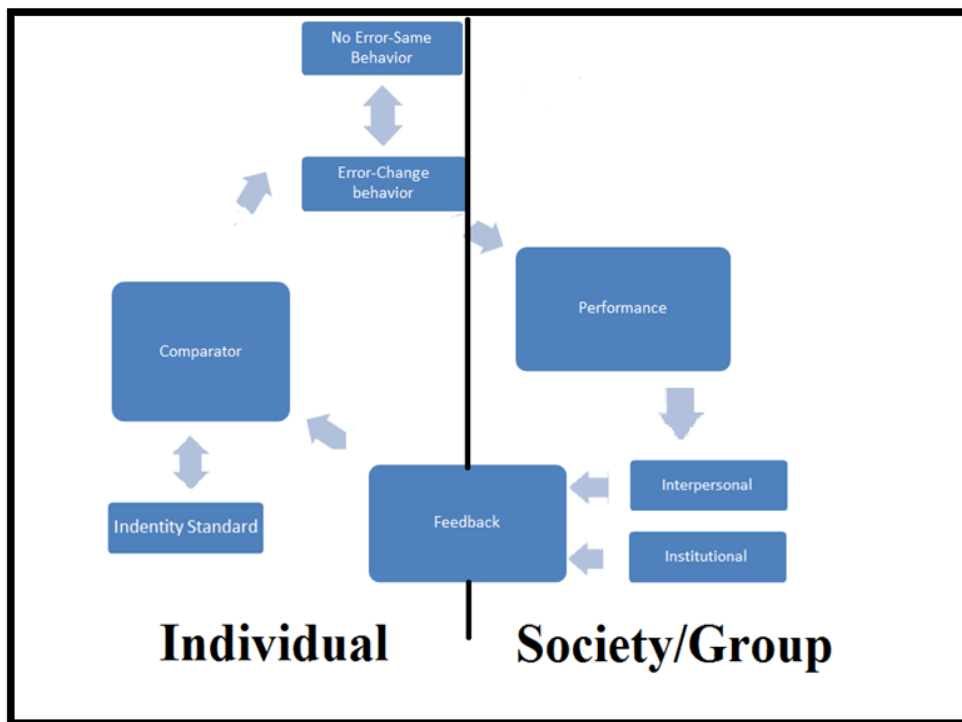


Figure 2: Modified Identity Control Model

upon joining her sorority, she began to feel pressured to lose weight. In her interview, she explains the way in which her ideas about her body began to transform. In her sorority, there are organized exercise groups which participation in is encouraged after every chapter meeting. The group of girls will get together and workout before going back home. This has become a weekly practice for a lot of girls. Kelly describe being so

Applying the story of Kelly, one of the sisters interviewed, to Burkes model offers up a clearer understanding of how this model works. Up until the time she joined her sorority, she had always felt confident about her body and believed she was healthy, overall, and had not considered herself in need of losing weight. However,

tired after meetings that she is unable to attend these organized exercise activities like the rest of the girls. Overtime, she started to compare herself to the sisters who participated weekly

“I think I have [changed] just because being in a sorority ...exposes you to a lot of different girls and you see all of them at least once a week and ... sometimes it is hard not to compare yourself to the small girls in your sorority. ... I think [being in a sorority has] maybe made me a little more self-conscious as far as being in that group.”

Seeing other girls obtain the “ideal” institutional body image made Kelly feel as if this was something that was obtainable and necessary for herself. She described the frustration of not looking like other sisters and expressed a strong desire to change. She went on to say that one of her high school friends was going through the same thing. Since they had gone to college and joined different sororities, her friend had lost a lot of weight. In this quote, she described the situation:

“I find myself kind of looking [my friends’] Facebook pages and see[ing] how they have changed, and I don’t know if it is a correlation between them being in a sorority ... if their body image has changed but ... [my friend] is in a sorority now, and she has just lost ... a ton of weight, and we used to be the same size.”

She continued by saying how seeing these people in her sorority and these changes in her friends made her go to her sisters for advice. She asked them if she should start losing weight. She described her sisters’ reactions as supportive. She was told things like, “no, you don’t” or “I do, too” or other comforting words of that nature. Even though they were saying that she didn’t need to lose weight, her sisters kept asking her if she wanted to go workout with them. After receiving this feedback, Kelly’s comparator produced an error message which led her to go to another sister and ask her if she would help her start exercising. Together, they started working out every week. Kelly even started going to others in her sorority asking for advice on how to have a better body type.

“I...told [someone] yesterday...I wanted to start working out... I [choose] her specifically because I feel like we have a similar body type...I was wonder[ing] if she felt the same way about her body as I did about mine... I found out that she did...She wasn’t really happy with the way she was looking, and she was surprised about how her body has changed [between] this semester [and] last semester. I ...felt like she would be a good person [and] that we can motivate each other...and work out together.”

She finished by explaining she believes this will be a positive thing for her. She felt as though working out with another sister would help her in the future to obtain a healthier body. Reactions from her sisters have also changed. Other sisters have started to tell her she is doing the right thing and congratulating her whenever she does lose weight. This positive reinforcement changed her behavior. After a while, Kelly’s definition of body image changed to include a

different body type and weight. When asked how she and her sorority defined body image, both definitions pertained to a certain body type and size.

When Kelly's story is applied to the model, it is clear there is an identity change going on in regards to body image. As an actor, Kelly's performance included a lack of exercise because her identity standard prior to joining the sorority did not include it. Once she entered the group, she received the institution feedback which promoted participation in exercise through organized groups. Kelly compared her previously held ideas related to her image with all the other girls in the group. Once she received advice from other sisters, her ideas are reevaluation. It is clear other sisters have also evaluated the institution's standard for exercise and began viewing it as important. She sees other sisters, like her friends in high school, who are taking the steps to lose weight and to create a "better" body image. Kelly compares the sister's definitions to her own identity standard. She finds an error in her behavior and corrects it by adopting an exercise routine with another girl in her sorority. Other sisters begin encourage this change by celebrating her weight loss and giving her advice on how to maintain this routine. At some point, Kelly's body image standard changes and now includes body type and exercise as important factors in creating a positive body image. It is clear that Kelly has internalized the sorority's definition of body image. There are many other stories given by sisters that also show the internalization of these values and standards. However, Kelly's story best illustrate the effects of feedback in this group setting.

Concluding Thoughts

As this and prior research on the subject suggests, identities are constantly under transformation, and the process by which these changes occur is extremely complex. This study provides evidence that sorority membership creates a social environment in which body images encapsulated in identity standards change over time due to strong institutional and interpersonal pressures. By using the lens of feedback mechanisms to observe identity change, feedback, light is shed on how and why identities are transformed over time in different group settings. Further studies should use different research methods to better understand this process and focus on other kinds of feedback besides interpersonal feedback. Research could also be improved by using additional qualitative methods like questionnaires, random sampling, and ethnographies that could further explore emerging themes found in this study.

Using a qualitative interview process to observe feedback in sororities, the researcher was able to extract a lot of interesting and important data from members. As explained by Dominic Abrams and Michael Hogg (2004), the primary reason the study of identity is so complex has to do with the fact that, often, researchers observe a wide range of social processes at once including conflict, intergroup behaviors and many more. This makes the study of identity rather complicated and impossible to fully research and understand using just one methodology. Therefore, it is of great benefit when conducting research on a subject to have more than one methodology applied. While a quantitative data analysis might come in handy for some follow up research projects, most symbolic interaction researchers seem to agree survey data is not useful for studying identity change. The use of questionnaires was suggested by Stephen Franzoi and Peter Burke (1988) as this method might provide interviewees with more time to think over their responses and articulate them much more clearly.

In order to perform a new study, there needs to first be random sampling done of schools around the nation. This study was limited to one school, and the participants were located using a snowball method. The snowball method limited the study to a small group of interviewees to a

group of people with similar backgrounds and experiences. In order to create a more representative data sample, these participants should be contacted randomly. Once willing participants are located, the researcher should create a questionnaire that contains both open and close-ended questions. The questions should be designed around the themes located in this research.

There should also be some questions centered on the institutional feedback mechanisms found in this set of interviews. Further inspection of this feedback would provide better insight to how body image standards are formed and why. The institution is a powerful producer of feedback. It gives people a set of standards and actions to abide by. For the most part, this factor has been ignored by researchers looking at identity theory. More research on this factor could provide a better understanding of how the identity change process works.

Lastly, there were a lot of time restrictions on this research; a future research project would consider using ethnography to explore identity. According to John Ogbu (2005) ethnographies can provide a rich amount of data. Ethnographies are performed through participation observation and can help researchers to better understand unspoken rules and meaning systems connected to identity. One of the drawbacks to this kind of research is that it is one of the more time-consuming methods. However, this would provide a much more detailed understanding of the themes previously mentioned.

This project was a fantastic journey into the world of identity standards through the eyes of symbolic interactionism. The construction and transformation of identities is a complicated process and can sometimes be hard to grasp fully, but taking the time to do so can provide understanding into how the social world works. This study and many others like it show us the unexpected influence that the groups have on their members. The groups we identify ourselves with shape and mold us. Understanding the influence we as social actors have on each other can help us to create more positive and powerful social groups. Hopefully, in the future, social scientists can take this research to the next level and provide new ways in which to shape the social world and make it our own.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Introduction: I want to first start off by thanking you for your participation in this study. Today I will be asking you a few questions about your sorority and your experiences in your sorority. This study will be exploring how groups like sorority change identities like body image. The interview should last up to two hour. If at any time you feel uncomfortable we can either skip the question or you can ask to leave. I have provided you with an interview contract with more information on this project and your rights as a participant. Do you have any questions before we officially start? Okay, I am going to start off by calling you *____ and your sorority *____ throughout this interview. This will help protect your identity and your sorority's identity. Also please remember that this study is looking at the development of identities and no to place judgment on the sorority itself.

1. **How long have you been in you been in your sorority? (General information)**
2. **What is the main reason you joined? (General information)**
3. **What is the social environment within you sorority like? Do you feel accepted and cared about? (General information)**
4. **What is your position? (General information)**

Probe: Have you ever taken on a leadership role with in the sorority?

5. **Body image can be a very emotional issue however it is also a pretty important issue in today's society. How do you define body image? (Body image)**

Probe: Why?

Probe: How do you think your sorority defines body image?

Probe: Besides health, what are some other motivations to why you exercise?

Probe: Whenever your sisters do talk about weight what do they usually talk about? How do they talk about it?

Probe: Is weight a concern to the group?

Probe: If weight is concern how does this make you feel?

Probe: How do you change it?

6. **Are there a set of official standards within your sorority that govern how you are supposed to look? (body image)**

Probe: Do most people follow these standards?

Probe: If you could would you change them?

7. **Do you feel your sorority is over all a supportive group of friends? (Positive/ Emotional verification)**

Probe: Can you give me an example of this support? (bad day, outfit, family issues)

Probe: How comfortable are you with your sorority sisters? (Positive/ Affirmation)

Probe: Are there any other groups that you feel closer to?

Probe: Why?

8. **Do people in your sorority often give you advice? (Positive/ Emotional Verification)**

Probe: What type of advice?

Probe: Do you ever act on this advice?

Probe: Do you actively seek this advice?

Probe: How do you think your sisters would feel if you didn't take this advice?

9. **How common is it for sisters to give each other compliments? (Positive/Self-verification)**

Probe: What kind of compliments is common?

Probe: Do you, yourself receive these compliments often?

Probe: What is your favorite compliment?

Probe: What would happen if you didn't receive these compliments?

Probe: How do they affect the way you feel and act the rest of the day?

Probe: What kind of compliments do you like to receive?

10. How important is it to be given approval by your sisters? (Positive/Affirmation)

Probe: Have you ever gone out of your way for approval?

Probe: In what ways has this affected your actions in the past?

Probe: Has there ever been a time when you felt like the way you looked was not approved of?

11. If you found a dress that you liked a lot but your sister didn't like it would she still support you wearing it? (Positive/ Emotional verification)

Probe: If they didn't would you stop wearing it?

Probe: Why?

12. Let's assume for a moment that there is a day that you feel that you look bad, what do you think your sisters would do? (Positive/Self-verification)

Probe: How does this reaction make you feel?

Probe: What if a sister came up to you and you could tell they felt bad what would you say?

13. If someone outside your sorority insulted someone in your sorority in front of another sister what do you think your sisters would do? (Positive/ Affirmation)

Probe: What if it were sister that insulted another sister?

Probe: Would it change your feelings about them?

Probe: Can you name any situations where this happen?

Probe: What did you do?

Intermission: *I am going to give you a short break. After the break we are going to start moving away from this topic and start talking about some of your negative experiences with your sorority. Please be as honest as you can, remember that at no time will your identity or identity of your sorority be revealed.*

14. Can you think of a time that body image such as looks have been a problem? (Negative Criticism)

Probe:(No)What about during rush?

Probe: Why was it such a problem?

Probe: How did the sorority react?

Probe: Did they show disapproval through actions or verbally?

Probe: What were your feelings about the problem?

Probe: How did you react?

Probe: Did this change your feelings about your sorority?

15. Has there ever been a time that another sister has felt criticized by others? (Negative Criticism)

Probe: What was happening?

Probe: What did she do? Did she fix the problem did she leave?

Probe: How did the others react to her choice?

Probe: If it were you would you have reacted differently?

16. Is there any kind of pressure to go to the gym? (Negative Criticism)

Probe: Do you think there is any kind of pressure from your sorority sisters?

Probe: What would happen if one day a sister didn't feel like going to the gym? What would happen?

Probe: What happens when you do go?

17. How would you react if other sorority members were making fun of someone? (Negative Criticism)

Probe: (Making fun of weight, clothing, ect)

Probe: How often does this happen?

Probe: Can you think of a time this has happened?

Probe: Do you feel like your sisters are ever judgmental of the way others look?

Probe: Why or why not?

18. Let's say there is a sister who keeps doing something that the sorority doesn't like. What does the sorority do to stop this behavior? (Negative Criticism)

(If yes) Prob: Can you give me an example?

Probe: What did they deny?

Probe: Where they excluded form an event?

Probe: How did it change the way they acted later?

(If no) How does the sorority show their disapproval?

19. If you felt criticized by your sorority would you leave? (Changing behavior)

Probe: Why or why not?

Probe: Would you try to correct the problem before leaving?

Probe: How so?

Probe: To what degree would you put up with criticism from your sisters?

Probe: Do you know about a sister who has felt this way and left?

Probe: why did she leave?

Probe: would you have dealt with the situation differently?

Probe: How?

Probe: What would (what else) make you want to leave you sorority?

Concluding: *Well that is all the questions I have today. If I need you can I contact you with any follow-up questions? Thank you again for your participation. Do you have any more questions or concerns? Do you have the copy of the interview contract and pamphlet from the school? If you do have any (more) questions please feel free to contact me. My and my advisor's contract information is provided on the interview contract. If you are interested I would also be happy to provide you with a copy of my findings. As thanks for your time you will be receiving a thank you gift and 2 hours community service.*