SORORITY RECRUITMENT AND ITS IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the sorority recruitment process and the impacts it has on individuals. After existing literature was reviewed, speed and online dating emerged as potentially comparable to the sorority recruitment processes, providing a guiding framework for the project. Twenty-five in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted using purposive and snowball sampling methods to select subjects with varying lengths of experience in the recruitment process. Individuals engaged in different types of impression management based on their understanding of stereotypes of each sorority. Further, differing social support systems emerged as a way of categorizing individuals' rush experiences. Additionally, the emotional toll and diverse coping mechanisms employed during recruitment emerged as prominent themes, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of the sorority experience. Then, limitations and future research was discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Sororities are a longstanding social tradition dating back to the 1800's when some of the first colleges were established (Canopy n.d.). Sororities are one of the few predominantly female-led social organizations on campuses, maintaining a semblance of their original values despite evolving structures and activities. The National Panhellenic Conference outlines key principles of what a sorority may offer including, "a good democratic social experience, a sense of belonging, development of an individual's potential, etc." (National Panhellenic Conference n.d.). Many individuals join sororities in hopes of gaining access to these attributes (National Panhellenic Conference n.d.).

Under the umbrella term of Greek life there are academic, professional, multicultural fraternities, and there are also social fraternities and sororities. The first social organization in Greek life was named Kappa Alpha and established at Union College in 1825. Social fraternities are defined as organizations that do not promote a certain profession or discipline. Since their origin, they have become very popular across college campuses. For example, in 1920 there were 774 reported social fraternities/sororities, and by 1929 there were 1,874, which has continued to grow since then (Social Fraternities n.d.). The majority of sororities at colleges and universities today are associated with the National Panhellenic Council, an organization which serves to oversee, provide opportunity and generally govern the affiliated sororities. Greek life encompasses many unique characteristics that vary depending on the organization, institution and the collective focus of its members. Panhellenic sororities are a subgroup of organizations within Greek life, which adhere to a specific recruitment process for individuals seeking eligibility to join them. They share some similarities with other Greek organizations mentioned earlier, though Panhellenic sororities also have numerous differences and intricacies, particularly related to their formal recruitment process, which will be further discussed.

RECRUITMENT

Typically, college sororities participate in either spring or fall formal recruitment. Larger universities and institutions in the south often opt for fall rush, while smaller northeastern schools typically hold spring recruitment. The focus of this research study examines the recruitment process at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), a smaller northeastern liberal arts college. Prior to spring rush, there may be pre-rush interest sessions and meetings used to gauge the interest of potential new members (PNMs). Then, during the winter break, PNMs are provided with a sorority recruitment form to officially register for rush week. Preparations for recruitment can span days or even months, involving considerations about

attire, verbal responses, social media, overall presentation and knowledge about existing sororities at the college (National Panhellenic Conference n.d.). The formal recruitment process itself, however, lasts only five days.

The first day, referred to as "open day" at some schools, begins with a day full of conversations, where PNMs have the opportunity to speak with sisters from every sorority on campus. This is typically the most lighthearted day of conversation with questions revolving around topics of hometowns and majors. After each conversation, sorority sisters rank the PNMs using a ranking system which is kept private by each sorority. Acceptance or rejection is based on only these few minutes of conversation along with their selected outfits. PNMs also may take time to curate their social media and posts, as sororities may take this into consideration. At the end of the first day, PNMs meet with their Rho Gamma before ranking their top sorority choices based on this first day of conversations (National Panhellenic Conference n.d.). At The College of New Jersey, PNMs choose between the eight sororities they visited. This similar process happens throughout the next four days, being interviewed, ranked and then accepted or rejected. Then, on "bid day," PNMs receive a final call from Rho Gammas, informing them about any bids they received or if they haven't received any bids. Typically, bid day is followed by a celebration with the selected sorority. (National Panhellenic Conference n.d.). Important to note is that at TCNJ and across other college campuses, recruitment was over Zoom for the 2021 and 2022 seasons, which presented some complexities unique to this form of recruitment, which will be discussed in later interviews and findings.

RESEARCH SCOPE

As a researcher of college sororities and their formal recruitment process, it is important for me to outline my personal experience which provided me with access to additional knowledge and groups, allowing me to conduct this research effectively. I joined a sorority during my first year of college, and participated in the formal recruitment process over Zoom since this occurred during the Covid pandemic in 2021. I underwent the new member education process and became initiated into the sorority. I was a member of this Greek organization for ten months, before ultimately formally renouncing my membership during the fall of my second year on campus. This experience piqued my interest in the subject, and fueled my desire to deepen my understanding of this community.

As a student of TCNJ, my curiosity on the recruitment process was sparked. I was eager to uncover how such a mysterious and often controversial system can be present on so many liberal college campuses across the country. This research focuses on sororities affiliated with Panhellenic organizations. Drawing from personal experience, interviews, and insights gleaned from reading and research, this study aims to examine the impacts of sorority rush on student lives. This study explores the elements of preparation, support, and coping strategies employed throughout the sorority rush process. Through comprehensive interviews, this study examines the narrative of individuals who have participated in either informal or formal recruitment with the goal of understanding their experiences and how these experiences have impacted them. The research question that emerged is: How do individuals experience the formal Panhellenic sorority recruitment process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted to deepen understanding of existing research on sororities, as well as to gain insights into social processes analogous to the sorority rush process. There was limited research on the sorority recruitment process and its impacts, and thus when examining social processes analogous to the sorority recruitment process, various facets of dating, including online and speed dating have emerged as comparable processes. Sorority recruitment involves diverse types, lengths and intensities of preparation for brief conversations, followed by almost immediate acceptance or rejection. Similar preparation is required for speed and online dating to construct the desired image for the other person. Degen and Kleeberg-Niepage conducted a study demonstrating that online dating users very meticulously select photos for their profiles, aiming to portray themselves in a certain way by paying careful attention to angles, trends and viewer perceptions. This practice aligns with the concept of impression management, where individuals tailor their presentation for their audience, as discussed by

sociologist Erving Goffman. He talks about this in his work, "The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life," and compares individuals to actors, where they perform for those watching them, and are constantly managing their impressions by considering the way in which they are presenting themselves, and how they might be perceived (Goffman 2022). He also discusses this related to his self-presentation theory, where he explains individuals' desire to control their image (Goffman 2022). Impression management is central to both dating profiles and in-person dating experiences and can be applied to aspects of sorority recruitment (Degen et. al. 2023). The image preparation techniques used in online dating also apply to speed dating. Individuals are deeply concerned with how they present themselves to potential partners, sharing and withholding certain information to present themselves in the most favorable light. Since physical appearance, including clothing, makeup and overall presentation, is partially under the participants' control, it holds significant importance in these brief conversations, whether occurring online or in person. A study found that physical attractiveness was the major determinant of whether an individual wanted to move forward with the other person, emphasizing the value placed on physical appearance during these interactions (Arantes, et al. 2021).

After the creation of online dating profiles and the physical and mental preparations for speed dating, various types of rejections may be experienced following these rapid dates or conversations. The nature of these rejections may be influenced by factors such as the amount of preparations, the individual's attachment style, dating history, familiarity with the other person, and other considerations. A study considered the various types of rejection experienced in dating, associating rejection with primal instincts rooted in the desire for acceptance within a group, much like animals wanting the benefits of belonging to a pack. The study examined individual and situational factors, and identified several types of rejection (Leary 2015). Hurt feelings, derived as being more intense when the individual derived considerable value in the relations and if there was betrayal or explicit rejection involved. Other types of rejection included jealousy, loneliness, homesickness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, embarrassment, sadness and anger. Each of these feelings have different experiences associated with them. For instance, feelings of shame after rejection may lead to social isolation and withdrawal from social interactions (Leary 2015).

Various types of rejection are encountered in dating, and individuals may respond to these emotions differently depending on the situation. Regarding the handling of rejection in online dating, a study explained that these feelings of rejection may be attributed to misuse of the dating application (app), or more negatively, from feeling, "not good enough as a person or at least not good enough in comparison to others." Such emotions can have negative impacts on self-esteem and self-image (Degen et al. 2023). In the realm of online dating, another study explored the use of online dating as a form of validation. Particularly, individuals with lower self-esteem might develop an addiction to the validation provided by online dating. However, if one's self-esteem is based on the validation received from online dating, the feelings of rejection are also more severe (Orosz et al. 2018). The reconciliation of these feelings may be related to the rejection sensitivity theory, which posits that there are three factors leading to the intensity of rejection experienced in dating: anxious expectations, perceptions of rejection, and cognitive-affective reactions. These factors, established at the beginning of a relationship, contribute to the intensity of rejection that an individual experiences (Mandira 2023). Examining existing research on dating provides valuable insights into different aspects of this social realm that can be compared and applied to sorority recruitment.

METHODOLOGY

In order to acquire data on individuals experiences related to sorority recruitment, in-depth interviews were conducted. A research proposal was sent to the IRB in which included sample interview questions, a consent form for interviewees, and a description of the research project. Once receiving approval, twenty five in-depth interviews of students from TCNJ were conducted, which was coupled with a review of existing literature to mitigate bias. The semi-formal structured interviews occurred during the Fall and Spring semesters of 2023 and 2024. Interviewees selected all participated in formal or informal sorority recruitment and were all past or current students at TCNJ. Selection utilized both purposive and snowball sampling methods. Snowball sampling occurred as several interviewees gave referrals of

contacts who might be interested in discussing this subject. Interviews generally lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, and though were largely semi-structured, some sample questions included; What were your motivations for rushing? How did you feel after completing your first day of recruitment? Did you ever consider dropping out throughout the week?

The target population included four groups: Students who were interested in sorority participation, began the rush process, but dropped out early (2), students who accepted a bid and participated throughout their entire college experience (17), students who accepted a bid, participated for a time, but eventually dropped out of their sorority (3), students who participated in less formal processes such as fall recruitment or COB (3). In the sample, there were four freshmen, six sophomores, eight juniors, two seniors, and five past graduates. Informed consent was obtained in all cases, where interviewees signed the consent form, which was ensuring confidentiality of interviewees' identities and their organizations. Participants were also informed of their right to end participation at any time. Interviews were recorded after consent was obtained. Interviews occurred in-person, over the phone, and over Zoom, depending on the interviewees preference and convenience. No clear differences in the data arose based on the different methods of communications. However, generally it seemed as though the phone and Zoom interviews seemed to be more natural for interviewees, as opposed to in-person interviews which took more time for the interviewee to appear more comfortable and open.

My prior participation in a sorority enabled my accessibility to this population. Sororities are secretive by nature, ever since the first secret society was created back in the 1700's. To many they are a mysterious group, commonly inaccessible and unexplainable to outside parties given the lack of transparency. Members of sororities are instructed to keep particular aspects of recruitment, rituals, passwords and songs secretive except to those initiated into the group. Thus, having exclusive access to this social network, often concealed from the public eye, allowed me to conduct this research though not without encountering some challenges. Further, being in a sorority in the past, this impacted my positionality as an interviewer based on the fact that my own experiences naturally impact my view on the subject of sorority recruitment, which could affect results. However, it was important to remain open-minded when coding and analyzing the data, as not to project or assume more negative outcomes based on my own experience.

Following this, all interviews were manually transcribed, reviewed and coded for several themes which are presented as findings. Transcriptions were done based off of Zoom recordings used to record each interview. The codes which were used to analyze the transcribed interviews were friends, motivations, parental involvement, rejections, validation, publicity, presentation, social media, preparations, and coping.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Upon analyzing the twenty-five in-depth qualitative interviews conducted, several themes and findings emerged which will be addressed in this section.

Stereotypes and Impression Management

Through in-depth interviews, it appears that individuals have developed a form of tacit knowledge about sororities in college, where they possess awareness of stereotypes associated with each sorority and the perceived characteristics of the girls within them. This knowledge is transferred informally through various means such as conversation, social media and observation. Participants in the interviews used descriptive phrases like "the mean ones," "the smart sorority," "the outgoing sorority," and even the "fake tan country girl sorority," to describe the stereotypes associated with each sorority at TCNJ. According to the individuals, each sorority has a specific stereotype, and there is a preconceived notion about the type of person who would join each one. Interviewee 10 explained, "when someone walks in a room and you hear they were in ——, you already feel like you know something about them" (Interview 10). Scrutinizing social media profiles of sororities has been a common method for participants to prepare for recruitment, helping them assess where they might fit best based on the appearance of current sisters. Conversations and prior friendships also play a role in learning about the types of girls who might join each sorority, uncovering different stereotypes associated with them.

A recent graduate, who rushed her freshman year, shared how her understanding of sorority stereotypes prior to rushing steered her away from considering certain ones. She noted "that most of her friends were more outgoing, and they're really really cool, but they don't have similar personalities to me, they're more outspoken" (Interview 12). This suggests that individuals, based on these few words associated with each TCNJ sorority, assessed whether they and their friends could fit within them. Additionally, these stereotypes are intertwined with the ranking and social hierarchy of sororities, influencing individuals' interest in joining them.

One individual elaborated on how sorority stereotypes also come with a classification and ranking system, determining whether they are perceived as good or bad. She stated, "unfortunately, I feel like even just through word of mouth, it does kind of here at TCNJ have a hierarchy of which orgs are good and then which ones are cool and quote on quote, bad" (Interview 9). This sentiment was echoed by many interviewees who expressed a preference for being in one of the "top four orgs," and dissatisfaction if left with only the "bottom two" organizations. Several interviewees even opted out of the rush process altogether when they were left with only the "bottom two sororities," which are known "to take everyone."

This concept extends beyond sororities and is observable in other aspects of social life, including competitive groups or organizations like colleges, sports teams or clubs. The most exclusive and competitive groups seemed to be the most desired, while those lacking special talents or academic rank may be perceived as less desirable. In this social context, a similar phenomenon exists where certain sororities are viewed as extremely selective, while others are likened to participation trophies. Thus, a sort of social sorting system has emerged within sororities across America, where individuals are categorized based on unknown criteria and credentials into groups perceived to vary in worth, which is widely understood among the TCNJ student community. These findings relating to sororities being a sorting system can be compared to existing works on cliques in adolescents, where cliques are like sororities in that they are hierarchical, and individuals may desire to be a part of one of these set social groups, and inclusion criteria is largely unclear. They tend to be selective in nature, as not just anyone can join, which is similar to sorority rush in that individuals might not be aware of the qualities in which they must possess in order to join certain groups (Adler 1995).

An individual who rushed through the COB process her freshman year shared her experience of joining and eventually dropping out of one of these lower-ranked sororities. She explained "I don't really feel I'm a low ranking person, so I don't really like being in the lowest ranking sorority on campus" (Interview 13). This quote underscores the significance of social hierarchies within sororities. She felt that her sorority carried a negative connotation, leading to preconceived notions about her before meeting her. Ultimately, she chose to drop her sorority because she believed its social standing did not align with her self-worth. Another individual within a lower-ranked sorority discussed the challenges associated with belonging to this social group. She explained that due to the chapter's quota, and lack of interest from potential new members, sorority members interviewing individuals were unable to reject new candidates. Despite encountering prospective new members who showed little effort or respect during interviews, they couldn't turn them away due to the sororities' need to increase membership. This situation resulted in frustration and further demoralization for the participants, who felt compelled to continue interviewing individuals who showed no genuine interest, perpetuating feelings of inadequacy and hurting their self-esteem.

Impression Management

This tacit understanding of stereotypes and social hierarchy led to another common experience among many individuals: engaging in impression management based on their perceptions of each sorority's stereotypes and preferences. Interviewee 14 explained that, "To some sororities I would say I was watching the television show Friends, and others I would say the shows that I actually watch" (Interview 14). She elaborated that, depending on the stereotypes associated with each sorority, she chose whether or not to disclose her involvement in musical theater. In general, she remarked, "I kind of guessed what people would more likely want to hear" (Interview 14).

Individuals displayed significant involvement in impression management, leveraging their knowledge of the characteristics associated with each sorority and their perceived hierarchy, which they gleaned from conversations or online sources, to tailor how they presented themselves. This adjustment was evident both verbally, in the types of information they chose to share, and physically. Participants described altering their appearance, selecting different clothing styles than usual, straightening their hair when they might normally leave it natural, or wearing makeup when they typically did not. One interviewee even mentioned modifying their voice to sound lighter, feeling that it wasn't "bubbly and energetic enough" over Zoom (Interview 4).

One individual explained that when growing up she had never embraced wearing any makeup and was nervous before rushing since she didn't embody the typical image of a sorority girl who wore lots of makeup and had flawless hair. She sought assistance from friends who provided her with makeup tutorials prior to rushing, and helped her prepare for the various rounds of rush (Interview 7). This serves as another instance of impression management, as she acknowledged feeling out of place compared to the stereotypical image of a sorority girl. Despite this, she recruited her friends to provide her tutorials so that she could present herself in a manner that would align more closely with the expectations of these groups (Interview 7).

A freshman who recently participated in rush shared in her interview that clothing played a significant role in the process, requiring considerable thought on how she wanted to present herself. "Clothing was a big component of it. Honestly, I don't know why. I just thought that was their first impression of me and so I asked a lot of other people what they were wearing, too, and borrowed clothes" (Interview 5). She explained that clothing was particularly emphasized during in-person interactions, as there was more opportunity for comparison with others. Also, her preparations for rushing primarily involved browsing social media to gain insight into the current members' styles, adding pressure to select an outfit that might appeal to the existing members of the sorority she hoped to join.

Even further, some individuals were altering their personalities and what they chose to share about themselves. These behaviors align with the concept of impression management, as discussed by the sociology theorist Erving Goffman, who suggests that individuals engage in unconscious efforts to influence others' perceptions and achieve a desired public image by showcasing different parts of oneself (Goffman 2022). Goffman posits that impression management is a fundamental part of daily social interactions where individuals are compared to actors on a stage constantly striving to shape the perception of others (Goffman 2022). Similar concepts were discussed in the original literature review related to speed dating and online dating, where individuals curated their online images through selective photo sharing, demonstrating impression management (Degen et. al. 2023). Furthermore, in brief encounters such as speed dating, individuals perform in a manner that reflects their idealized selves, illustrating another form of impression manegment.

Support Systems

During the recruitment process, participants described a range of emotions, spanning from nervousness and anxiety, to thrill and excitement. Regarding the support system available to cope with these emotions, three distinct categories emerged based on participants' interviews and their social networks.

<u>I. Strong Family and Peer Support</u>

Friend and family involvement emerged as a recurring theme in several individuals' experiences, playing a pivotal role in aiding the processing of emotions and providing reassurance throughout the sorority recruitment process. Participants highlighted the support they received from family and friends, who offered advice, encouragement and motivation to navigate or persevere in the recruitment process. Despite the recommendation against sharing specific experiences during the recruitment process, participants found comfort in confiding in one another for support and guidance. For instance, an individual recounted maintaining constant communication with her mother throughout rush week, with

nightly discussions about her experiences and receiving continual reassurance and support, which alleviated her anxieties and uncertainties (Interview 15).

This support became particularly crucial during moments of anxiety and second thoughts about whether to continue with the recruitment week. Further, one individual, currently a junior who rushed during her freshman year, emphasized the significance of her nightly calls with her mother, stating, "she was the only one I really talked to about this" (Interview 16).

Additionally, many individuals highlighted the significant role their friends played as a support system, encouraging each other to persevere through challenges and providing a safe space to discuss their experiences. A freshman, seeking additional reassurance after completing rush, expressed gratitude for her friend's support, "Yeah, she definitely helped me a lot like she kept reminding me to do what's best for me and it would all end up okay (Interview 5)." Through several accounts of peer and parental support, it became evident that a strong support system played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety of PNMs, and facilitating the processing of their recruitment experience. Individuals who maintained strong communications and ties with friends and families throughout the process appeared better able to cope, particularly during challenging moments and in the face of rejections. This initial example of strong friend and parental support played an important role in motivating individuals to navigate the rush process and offered a means for sharing and processing experiences. These findings are consistent with existing research that emphasizes the importance of the quality and quantity of an individual's social ties and support. Studies have shown that social support is directly linked to overall well-being, encompassing both physical and mental health, as well as reducing the risk of suicidal thoughts (Umberson n.d.). The reliance on a strong social support system during the sorority rush process, particularly in times of adversity, aligns with established sociological literature, highlighting the profound impact of social networks on individuals' health and resilience (Umberson n.d.).

II. Weak Peer Support and Negative Comparisons

The first example of strong peer and parental involvement represented a category into which several participants' fell, benefiting from reassurance and comfort provided by their support systems. However, other cases exemplified a different type of support systems, where peer involvement complicated the recruitment week by adding pressure and drawing attention to the experience. While strong peer support could positively influence an individual's experience, insincere support might have adverse effects, leading to feelings of judgment and even ostracization. An individual described her rush week experience from the prior year when she was a sophomore. She explained that prior to rushing she had struggled socially and frequently returned home most weekends. When her few friends on her floor decided to rush, she felt compelled to follow suit to fit in. Upon learning which sororities she was asked back by, she found herself in a room with all her friends. To her dismay, she discovered that she had been dropped by almost all the sororities, while her friends had received invitations. She recalled her friends' shocked reactions, which left her feeling self-conscious and questioning her relationships and values within the group (Interview 11). This instance illustrates how peer support can inadvertently hinder an individual's rush experience. Despite the appearance of genuine support, peers may have offered less encouragement and more judgment, exacerbating feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. While her friends celebrated their successes in joining top sororities, the interviewee grappled with feelings of inadequacy and fear of scrutiny within her social circle. (Interview 11).

Going through the recruitment process alongside friends triggers automatic comparisons, adding complexity to the experience. Even in cases where support systems are more positive, individuals tend to compare themselves to others in order to gauge out their "ranking", and make sense of their own experiences. One recent graduate expressed concerns about the detrimental effects of rushing with friends and noted "I think rushing with friends hurts people, with constant comparison and the extra public pressure" (Interview 8). Rushing with friends not only intensifies comparisons regarding the number of sororities one receives callbacks from but also amplifies the public nature of the experience. Rushing is often seen as a socially expected step, and when many members of one's freshman floor decide to rush, there may be pressure for others to follow. With so many individuals going through this experience simultaneously, rejections become public affairs, especially for freshmen who commonly

reside in the same buildings or floors. Consequently, rushing with friends can complicate the rush process, regardless of the genuineness of the relationships involved, leading to inevitable comparison and heightened publicity that may result in increased feelings of shame and humiliation.

Therefore, in some cases, peer and parental support may serve to alleviate negative feelings and act as a support network for an individual throughout the rush week. However, weaker peer relationships going through the process in closer contact may complicate the rush week process since the support received may end up feeling more like judgment than genuine support. Further, rushing with friends leads to inevitable comparison between each other, and publicizes an already difficult experience, adding an additional layer of complexity and potential pressure.

III. Isolated/ Zoom Rush

Finally, a third alternative of support systems has emerged through interviews, which involves rushing in a more isolated context, whether that means with few or no friends rushing, or completing the week of interviews over Zoom. As discussed previously, for those who rushed during 2021 or 2022, the process occurred during winter break, conducted over four consecutive days via Zoom. Unlike the traditionally demanding in-person process, the online format resulted in significantly less social exhaustion, comparison, and public pressures. Most individuals who rushed during these two years did so alone from their respective homes, receiving support from their parents and any friends they chose to contact. Also, since the rush process was conducted over Zoom, individuals reported feeling less pressure about their outfits and appearance, as only the top half of the screen was visible. The absence of the overwhelming nature of all-day, in-person rushing was also noted. One junior explained,

> "Yes, I don't think honestly I would have done it in person because it's very overwhelming. I think now I'm definitely more shy than I was, and on zoom you still definitely get a little nervous but you also don't have the pressure of talking to people about it after" (Interview 3).

Interviewee 3 emphasizes the intensity of the rush impacts, noting that even though she is currently happily in a sorority, she would have reconsidered undergoing the experience if it would have been in person due to the added pressures. Several interviewee's voiced similar sentiments, expressing that they wouldn't have chosen to rush if it had been an in-person experience, citing concerns about the influence of friends, judgements, and its overwhelming nature of the process.

However, other individuals voiced some of the downsides of rushing over Zoom, highlighting the absence of assistance in processing and the support that individuals rushing in person might typically receive when with friends and individuals who can help them make sense of their experiences.

One recent graduate discusses her rush experience in the spring of her sophomore year after transferring when she didn't know too many people. She explained that after getting dropped by all of her top choices of sororities, she was "left that morning being just very confused not really understanding how it happened" (Interview 17). Feeling uneasy and lacking confidence, she ultimately decided to drop out of the process because her top choices didn't align with the sororities that extended invitations to her. However, she ended the experience feeling unsettled and without closure. Even four years later, and after graduating, she still felt eager to discuss this experience with someone, as she had never fully processed it due to lack of someone to debrief with.

These findings align with current research on the impact of strong social relationships, which highlights how weaker networks can impact one's overall wellbeing and mental health. When faced with adversity without a strong support system, individuals may find it challenging to cope with rejections, as their tolerance for such experiences may be lowered compared to those with stronger support networks (Umberson n.d.).

Thus, the final type of support system that emerged involves individuals who rushed in a more isolated context. This type has both pros and cons, similar to the other types. On one hand, individuals may feel less overwhelmed and may not experience the pressures and intensity of comparisons that in-person rush presents. However, rushing in a more isolated context also has its drawbacks. It may limit the opportunities for individuals to process their experiences fully, as they are navigating the rush

process with fewer external inputs and less information to help them rationalize and help make sense of their experience.

Impacts of Recruitment

Emotional Impacts of Rejection

As individuals recounted their own stories during recruitment, many highlighted how the rush process impacted their emotional and psychological well-being, leading to findings on the mental health impacts of recruitment, particularly related to the rejections experienced. Individuals coped with feelings of rejection in varied ways, with some experiencing them more intensely than others. Naturally, each person's unique rush experience influenced the extent of rejection they encountered, with some facing greater rejection than others based on the number of sororities that dropped them throughout the week. However, a notable finding emerged regarding the correlation between intensity of feelings of rejection and the individual's social connections, and their desire for more. The amount of pressure placed on recruitment to improve one's social connections on campus appeared to be correlated with intensity of rejection experienced. Several interviewees described struggling socially prior to rushing, and entered the recruitment process with the primary goal of finding a social group they could feel more connected with. Consequently, when these individuals faced rejection during the rush week after placing high pressure on sororities to help establish their social network for them, these feelings of rejection were significantly amplified.

A recent graduate who had decided to rush due to her limited friends on campus after transferring explained that she "rushed because she transferred and really wanted to meet people on campus" (Interview 17). However, later during the rush week process, despite never having wanted to join a sorority prior to attending TCNJ, she found herself deeply upset after experiencing rejection. She stated,

> "I mean, I felt since I was a transfer, I had a little bit of a low amount of friends on campus. So I was going into it and I felt kind of excited like, oh, maybe I'll like, I'll meet people, like this is what they all post on Instagram about, like. And I don't know, I definitely was jaded from the experience and it scorned me from making more friends at TCNJ because I didn't really feel like I understood why and just was so hung up on it, I don't know I felt so rejected" (Interview 17).

This exemplifies one individual who rushed primarily to meet new people, but, unfortunately, was unable to fulfill this goal. She was left feeling confused, frustrated, and hopeless at the idea of even making friends at the school. Without a social support system already in place prior to rushing, individuals may struggle even more than they had prior to rushing. She exemplifies both how individuals struggle more intensely without a social support network to help process feelings, as well as more intense feelings of rejection since she hoped to use this process as a means of developing a greater social network.

Another individual explained that she went through the rush process after struggling during her freshman year. Hoping to transfer in the fall, she decided to rush to meet new people. However, after getting rejected from most sororities while her other acquaintances on her floor hadn't, she felt disheartened and wanted to drop out of the process. It took her parents convincing against it to stay in.

> "Like I was almost gonna drop. I remember I called my mom, my dad, and I think my dad even ended up coming that day, but I was like, I don't want to do this anymore. They said it's not personal, but I feel like to some extent it is, especially being on the other side now, and I see how everything's ranked, the process, like, it's hard not to take it personally when it's like, a real sense of rejection" (Interview 11).

She explained the intensity of her feelings of rejection and how she heavily relied on her parents to aid in her coping, as she didn't have a social support system at school. Furthermore, she shared how joining a sorority actually solidified her understanding of the ranking system, making her feel that the feelings of rejection were valid once she now had a better understanding of how it worked (Interview 11).

This is an important point to note, where she explained that joining a sorority and gaining insight into the undisclosed ranking system validated their past feelings of rejection. Understanding some of the criteria by which she was ranked made her feel worse about the rejections than when she was less aware of the process. Thus, this exemplifies an individual having had a weaker support system prior to rushing, and having experienced more intense feelings of rejection.

In initial research on online dating, analogous findings emerged, individuals whose self-esteem was closely tied to validation they received from online dating, as well as those who expected the most out of online dating experienced more severe feelings of rejection (Orosz et al. 2018). This idea is similar to the correlation observed between pressure on sorority rush and intensity of rejection. If individuals placed greater weight on sorority rush as a means to make friends and validate themselves and their relationships, they tended to experience more intensive rejection. This was exemplified by the previous interviews discussed who explained having put much pressure on rush week as a means of helping them to build a social network, since they had weaker ones themselves. Therefore, it appears that these feelings of rejection are closely linked to the desire for a social support system, as well as the amount of pressure they placed on the process as a means of establishing new friendships on campus, and the initial hypothesis about online dating and its correlation to sorority recruitment has proven true.

Self-doubt

Further, in addition to experiencing general feelings of rejection during the rush process, it became apparent that individuals began to doubt their confidence in assessing themselves in a situation, as well as their ability to judge their connections with others. Many individuals felt that their self-esteem was weakened, and they lost confidence in themselves when they faced rejection from sororities.

One individual who rushed as a freshman shared her experience in the rush process, where she felt that she had several very good conversations but was dropped by almost every sorority the morning after the first day. She stated, "It's just really hard when you think that every conversation went so well, and then they all drop you. You kind of start to question yourself, and can't trust that any of the future conversations went well since you thought that the first ones had. " (Interview 14).

This exemplifies how the rush process can lead individuals to question themselves, as well as their ability to judge their past conversations and connections accurately. Experiencing rejection during rush may undermine an individual's confidence in their ability to critically analyze a situation and lead them to doubt their self-awareness within a conversation.

Further, another individual who rushed her sophomore year and ultimately dropped out part way through shared her experience. She expressed feeling frustrated and questioned her self-worth, experiencing harm to her self-esteem as a result of the process.

> "I felt like there was something wrong with me like I did something wrong that made them not like me, and I just like I guess it took a really big hit on my self esteem honestly because I just couldn't figure out what I did that caused them to drop me. I could have been more bubbly, I guess I was just like not my full self ...." (Interview 8).

She felt hurt and questioned what she could have done differently during those short conversations. She grappled with what she might have been rated poorly on and how she could have improved, all without receiving any feedback. Despite this, due to her desire to join a sorority and have an automatic big group of friends, she decided to rush again her junior year. However she admitted, "I actually was really hesitant about trying again because of how traumatic the last experience was and how awful I felt after because I cried for a week' (Interview 8).

The use of "traumatic" as her word choice emphasizes the intensity of the feelings she experienced after being rejected, leaving her feeling hopeless and upset for several days. Evenmore, during the interview, which took place over three years after the event, she still expressed being pained by this experience and noted a decline in her mental health. This often leads to questioning whether it was their personality, presentation, appearance, or anything else that may have been the reason in which they were dropped, ultimately resulting in self-doubt and a decline in mental health.

Validation and Comfort

While several individuals discussed experiencing emotional struggles throughout the rush process, largely due to the rejections they faced, there were also individuals who expressed having gone through the process with some anxieties and hesitations but ended up feeling validated and saw an improvement in their confidence.

For example, a sophomore who rushed as a freshman described being nervous prior to every round, but after the first day she said, "I was relieved that my top three or top four took me, I felt so much relief" (Interview 18). From this initial success, her confidence seemed to improve as the days went on, and she ultimately ended up joining the sorority she originally hoped for. This validation boosted her confidence since she was accepted by every sorority she had considered joining (Interview 18). Other individuals described similar experiences, where their anxieties were soothed as they continued to be accepted by the majority of sororities, making them feel welcomed and boosting their self-confidence. These findings are similar to the feelings of validation experienced in online and speed dating, where individuals felt greater satisfaction, increased self-esteem, and validation when they received positive responses or matches. There were also findings related to one's entire self-esteem being based on the validation they experienced through speed dating. This could be applicable to sorority rush as well, given the varying degrees of rejection and validation experienced, where individuals experience validation and positive self-esteem boosts from a "successful" rush week, which could be comparable to that of online or speed dating (Orosz et al. 2018).

Coping Mechanisms

Avoidance

Furthermore, additional findings emerged regarding how individuals cope with rejections and anxieties during sorority recruitment. Various coping methods were identified through interviews, revealing how individuals navigate these challenges. One of these coping methods involved the avoidance of acknowledging the situation, where individuals chose not to ask questions or dwell on their anxieties or rejections. Some individuals distracted themselves by focusing on schoolwork, spending time with friends, or engaging in other activities. Many individuals explained that when the rush process was spread across two weekends they found it particularly challenging to cope during the week in between. The waiting period of five days before finding out if they were dropped by any sororities was described as the most difficult part of the entire process. During this time, individuals had ample opportunity to question themselves and their past conversation, intensifying their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

A freshman who had just experienced the rush week process described how this week "gave me a lot of anxiety," and how "I was definitely anticipating it but I just tried hard to not think about it. But I also had my distractions like school work and stuff and my friends" (Interview 19). This illustrates a coping mechanism used to deal with the anxiety associated with the waiting period to find out which sororities individuals were called back by. Many individuals explained using this method to avoid questioning themselves. By avoiding thinking about the topic altogether, they might protect their self-esteem during these five days before ultimately finding out their rejection or acceptance. Another individual explained using a similar coping mechanism, expressing difficulty in dealing with the week in between, even when the first weekend had worked out almost entirely positively in her favor. She explained, " I think waiting just made me more anxious because yeah how do you get through that week in between, honestly, I don't even know how I did. I think that I remember I had so much homework that week, so that helped a lot" (Interview 18).

Through conversations, it became evident that avoidance was a major coping skill used by individuals to deal with anxiety. This avoidance tactic also extended to handling rejection, where individuals tried not to dwell on or discuss any rejections they may have received, in order to avoid further hurt. For instance, one individual rushed largely due to her brother's girlfriend being a member of the sorority she hoped to join. However, she was dropped by this sorority after just two days of rush week. Despite having the option to reach out to her brother's girlfriend for clarification, she chose not to

question or dwell on it. She stated, "I didn't want to ask why, I didn't want to get upset, I guess I just don't want to be somewhere no one wants me" (Interview 20).

She explained that she refrained from asking questions even when she had the chance, and she avoided thinking about this rejection because she didn't want to feel upset about the potential truth behind it. Existing research suggests that this is a relatively common coping mechanism, known as avoidance coping, where individuals use distraction to cope with difficult emotions. Other examples of avoidance coping include procrastination, canceling plans, and substance abuse. However, it was found that this form of coping is associated with additional stressors related to the lack of active coping (Allen 2021). This approach, however, served as one of the common coping methods of individuals throughout this process. In a situation where there is limited information about why one may have been dropped by their desired social group, it was easier for individuals to suppress these feelings rather than confront them directly.

Power in a Powerless Position

Furthermore, it was interesting to discover that many individuals mentioned that throughout the week, when facing rejection from sororities, they continued to remind themselves that they "could drop out at any time."

Some individuals explained that they actually did drop out. This constant self-reminder served as a reassurance that when the experience became too difficult and they faced rejection from desired sororities, they still retained control of the situation since they could ultimately choose to drop out. In a sense, individuals were reframing the situation where instead of being victims of the sorority recruitment process, they held the power. One individual who actually did end up dropping the sorority rush process explained, "No, I didn't want them at all. Like I couldn't see myself in them. So at that point I dropped completely" (Interview 8). This is one of the few examples in which an individual actually took power in the situation. Due to the fact that she didn't feel as though she was the right fit in the sororities that remained for her to choose between, she ultimately decided to drop the entire process. It is in a sense taking power within this situation, where even though the sororities determine where one is "categorized into," dropping out signifies an individual taking power within the situation. Also, as previosuly discussed, sorority recruitment is generally a public experience, so taking power in this situation displays to the campus community that you might have a stronger perception of yourself than the sororities may have of you. Several individuals also continued to remind themselves that they had the option to drop out of the process and remove themselves at any time, as they were asserting control and agency. Having agency in a situation, or reframing a situation in which you give yourself more power is associated with greater well-being as well as a greater sense of free-will and responsibility as found within existing literature on the impact of increased sense of agency. The absence of agency within a situation leads to difficulties in processing and wellbeing, so individuals coping in this way by reframing the situation aids in health and sense of security (Moore 2016). Even if an individual does not carry through with dropping out, using the fact that they could drop out at any time acted as a coping mechanism. This coping mechanism became a way for individuals to reaffirm themselves that the situation was not one-sided and that they held power to withdraw if they chose to do so.

Meant to Be

Another coping mechanism that emerged involved individuals reminding themselves that the situation was beyond their control. This is in contrast to the previous example where individuals asserted control. Participants explained that they would reassure themselves with phrases like "everyone will end up where they belong," and "they aren't the ones able to make the choices." This form of reassurance suggests that some individuals coped by distancing themselves from the situation, acknowledging lack of agency in determining the outcome. It seemed as though individuals perceived the process as guided by fate or some mystical force, providing an additional way for them to navigate and cope with rejection.

One individual explained that after rushing her freshman year of college, she was dropped by the majority of sororities after the first day. She explained that she enjoyed the conversations she had, but since she was dropped by most of them, she concluded that it wasn't meant to be. She explained, "Like, the people I talked to were great, and moving forward, maybe the other ones weren't meant to be,

everything kind of happens for a reason" (Interview 7). Thus, she exemplifies how she reconciled with the fact that the sororities dropped her by focusing on the fact that she had very limited, to no power in this situation, and emphasizing the idea that everything would end up working out in the end. Several other interviewees expressed similar sentiments, reminding themselves throughout the process that everything would somehow fall into place, taking the power away from themselves in the situation.

Discussion

Overall Findings

A cornerstone of collegiate social life, sororities have played a significant role in shaping the experiences of countless individuals over the years. Individuals discussed their understanding of the stereotypes of the different sororities, and whether or not they might fit in. Through these learned stereotypes, it was found that individuals took part in impression management at times when they hoped to fit the certain mold that they expected sorority members might want whether that be verbally making changes, or physically. Three different social support systems also emerged as a way of categorizing individuals' experiences, which impacted their processing of rejections and struggles throughout the week. These three types included; strong family and peer support, weak peer support and negative comparisons, and zoom or isolated rush. One finding emerged related to an individual's number of social connections prior to rushing and how this is correlated with their intensity of rejection. Additionally, the emotional toll and diverse coping mechanisms employed during recruitment emerged as prominent themes, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of the sorority experience. Finally, formal and informal aspects of the sorority system were discussed.

Limitations

When considering the limitations of the study, it's important to address the sampling methods utilized. The majority of the interviewee's were recruited through my personal network or via snowball sampling methods, potentially leading to a lack of diversity within the sample. This could result in a sampling bias, as participants may not fully represent the range of perspectives at The College of New Jersey. Further, some interviewees may have been aware of my past affiliation with a sorority, possibly influencing their responses to align with perceived expectations. Despite efforts to ask unbiased questions, this could introduce a form of response bias. It is also important to mention that there was an initial oversight related to the validation and self-esteem boosts that individuals experienced from their rush week experience. Having been in a sorority myself, this provided me with accessibility to the population, as well as further insight on the experience that would have not been possible otherwise. However, a potential limitation it presented was an oversight, since I had a more negative personal experience, I expected others might as well. However, after transcription and further analysis, these findings emerged related to positive emotional impacts of rush week, and feelings of validation and comfort, which I was able to further examine and discuss in the findings.

Further, the study encompasses participants who participated in sorority recruitment both in person and over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This may introduce discrepancies in the data, as the experiences of in-person and virtual recruitment differ in certain aspects, such as the distributions of rush days, interviews and ceremonies, and some other experiences. Thus the data collected from interviewees who participated in rush via Zoom may not offer as full of a picture as those who participate in the typical in-person rushing. Lastly, the secretive nature of sororities presents challenges to transparency during interviews. Participants may refrain from disclosing certain information or traditions reserved for sorority members, despite assurances of confidentiality. This could result in incomplete or withheld information, where some individuals may be hesitant to share personal sorority information even with the interviewer.

Future Research

Moving forward, there are several areas that merit further exploration. A key consideration is the institutionalization of sororities and their intergenerational influence within families. Participants highlighted instances where parents and siblings encouraged them to rush, with some even advocating

for them to join the same sorority they had been a part of. Investigating how these family ties shape sorority participation and allegiance over successive generations warrants further research. Additionally, delving deeper into the coping mechanisms for rejection is important, particularly in distinguishing between those who assert more agency by reminding themselves of their control to withdraw from recruitment and those who perceived the situation was more out of their control. Considering how these feelings of rejection impact individuals in the long term is also of interest, where several participants explained having still been impacted by these feelings from recruitment week a few years after it occurred. A future research question of a longitudinal study could be; Are there any long term mental health implications of complete or partial sorority rejection?

Exploring the incorporation of quantitative research alongside qualitative methods could provide a more holistic understanding of sorority recruitment dynamics. Conducting large-scale surveys distributed to the college students before, during, and after rush events, and then following up months or years later, could yield valuable insights. This mixed-methods approach would allow for the collection of comprehensive data, capturing both the immediate experience and long-term impacts of sorority recruitment on individual's well-being, social connections and academic performance.

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Appendix.

Interview 1	D, F. 2023, January 24 (Phone)
Interview 2	C, L. 2024, February 8 (Phone)
Interview 3	M, S. 2024, November 1 (In-person)
Interview 4	R, S. 2024, November 6 (In-person)
Interview 5	L, Z. 2024, February 13 (Phone)
Interview 6	L, S. 2024, November 28 (In-person)
Interview 7	R, H. 2023, December 7 (Phone)
Interview 8	E, W. 2024, January 22 (Zoom)
Interview 9	B, B. 2023, November 22 (Phone)
Interview 10	D, B. 2024, January 28 (In-person)
Interview 11	N, C. 2024, January 18 (Phone)
Interview 12	S, Z. 2024, November 12 (Zoom)
Interview 13	A, F. 2023, November 10. (Phone)
Interview 14	S, A. 2023, October 22. (In-person)
Interview 15	G, S. 2024, December 9. (In-person)
Interview 16	M, F. 2024, November 20 (Phone)
Interview 17	W,Y. 2024, October 3 (Zoom)
Interview 18	S, B. 2024, February 24 (Zoom)
Interview 19	C, C. 2024, February 12. (Phone)
Interview 20	M, G. 2024, January 12. (Zoom)
Interview 21	S, P. 2023. January 22. (In-person)