

FORCED CANDIDS, CHARISMA, AND CONFIDENCE: AN
EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM ON
COLLEGE WOMEN IN SORORITIES SELF-ESTEEM AND
SELF-IMAGE

by

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Social media has dominated mainstream culture and changed the social life of adolescents and young adults over the course of the last two decades. Instagram, developed in 2010, has become one of the most popular social media apps among this age group and has had an impact on the social culture of college students, but limited research has been done on exactly how that has impacted the well-being and identity formation of this population. Instagram especially has become a very popular site for college students affiliated with Greek life on campus, specifically for women in sororities, in terms of recruitment strategies and publicizing their social life. This thesis explores the impact of Instagram on college women, with a particular focus on women in sororities, through a survey completed by 41 students at the University of Oregon assessing their self-esteem, as well as their average Instagram usage and behaviors. Out of the 41 participants, seven women were interviewed and were able to give personal testimonies on their feelings and experiences with the app, as well as their experience in Greek life. Overall, no significant correlation was found between Instagram usage and self-esteem scores, for both college women in sororities and not. However, through interviews, there was a general pattern of feeling pressure around posting on Instagram and editing their lives and identity online in order to fit into a stereotypical sorority girl aesthetic. This study finds that the relationship between self-esteem and Instagram in college women is unclear but needs to be explored further, as the impact of the app itself is complex and cannot be quantitatively identified.

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Introduction

Greek life is a dominant presence found on most college campuses across the United States, and due to its long history, its impact on university social life is deeply rooted. Joining a chapter of a fraternity or sorority is seen by many as a way to network, both socially and professionally, and build connections and friendships that will outlast a student's time as an undergraduate. Being a part of these organizations has a large impact on members' socialization, and students affiliated with Greek life are more socially involved in campus life and thus this can improve cognitive development (Pike, 2000). Sororities specifically promote core values that reflect that affiliation can be an empowering experience, and women in sororities gain improved leadership and social skills due to the experience (Susemihl, 2021). However, there are many controversial and negative impacts of the socialization process, as Greek life is often a separate and isolated group from typical campus life, and this exclusivity reproduces institutional oppressive practices relating to both sexism and racism, as these chapters often lack diversity within their membership (Salinas et al., 2019). Due to the homogenous population, members likely feel pressure to conform to group norms, and women in sororities are more likely to succumb to this pressure, as well as being more likely to be self-conscious and seek group approval and external validation than members of fraternities (Serna et al., 2019).

There is a lot of social pressure that comes along with being part of a sorority, and much of this comes from the exclusivity of the organization. Members and leaders of sororities choose a select few girls out of a large pool of freshman women each year to join their chapter, and the selection process is based solely on first impressions and

social interactions, and how well one does at fitting in with the group. The impressions that potential new members make are based significantly on their appearance, in terms of attractiveness and fashionability, thus further perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women's value and worth, as appearance is how women are socialized to gain approval and social capital (Miller, 2006). Thus, the recruitment process is a stressful experience and can negatively impact these women's well-being, and women who are rejected and do not receive bids, or invitations to join a chapter, experience a significant decrease in their self-esteem (Chapman et al., 2008; Kase et al., 2016). Although women who successfully join sororities were found to feel increases in their social support, this social support is conditional. Sororities as a collective care a great deal about their reputation and their image among Greek social circles, and on-campus as a whole, as this reputation is how the sisterhood is kept alive. Therefore, members are expected to represent their chapter and its values through their identity, behaviors, and appearance in all social settings; they are heavily surveilled by their sisters, and rules are set in place for how they must look and act, so thus they must thus conform to the group's identity in order to maintain their good social standing (Gilmore, 2002). Effectively, women in sororities must be self-conscious in order to gain popularity and approval, and this likely could have lasting impacts on their own sense of identity and self-worth.

This pressure to always look and be at one's best and to conform can be stressful to deal with just in the context of Greek social circles and events, but the role of social media in sorority culture may exacerbate this burden. Social media has become increasingly popular over the last several decades, and in the United States currently, seven out of ten adults use social media at least once a day and the largest age group to

use these sites are young adults, from ages 18-29 (*Social Media Fact Sheet*, 2021). The current generation of young adults in college right now are the first generation to grow up on social media, as these sites became easily accessible in their childhood with the invention of smartphones. As of 2018, 95% of teenagers have access to smartphones, and 45% of those teenagers, ages 13-17, are reported to be online essentially at all times (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Therefore, students in college currently have been socialized and grown accustomed to sharing most aspects of their lives on social media.

With picture- and video-sharing social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, sorority girls are no longer just being monitored when in a chapter meeting or at a philanthropy event, but now any moment of those meetings or events can be captured and posted on social media, for hundreds or thousands of people to see, and potentially judge. As of 2016, Instagram was the most used social media site by college students, compared to Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, and a majority of the students used these sites from one to 10 hours per day (Knight-McCord, J. et al., 2016). Thus, “Instagram does not allow these sorority women to break out of their preformed image,” and it has become commonplace for women in sororities to capitalize on the popularity of the app among their social group, and use it to create a carefully curated image of themselves through their Instagram feed and stories in order to sell the appeal of sorority life to their followers, and keep up their own-and their chapter’s-reputation (McGuire, 2017, 41).

With the increase in social media prevalence and usage among adolescents and young adults in our society, rates of mental health issues have increased significantly in the last few years among college students. A study at Dartmouth College found that

over the last four years, but especially within the last two that have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, phone usage, as well as rates of anxiety and depression have significantly increased (Lumpkin, 2021). Low self-esteem can be a predictor for internalizing disorders, because if one's perception of themselves is mainly negative or insecure, they are more likely to perpetually be in a state of depression or anxiety (Mann et al., 2004). Instagram causes women in sororities to constantly present a version of themselves online that reflects a group identity, which may or may not be authentic to their own. Being inauthentic to oneself for fear of social scrutiny may create an unstable identity of self, and thus this thesis will explore the complexity of that notion. I hypothesize that women in sororities will both use Instagram more often than women who are not in Greek life, and will also report a lower sense of self-esteem overall due to their increased self-surveillance and possible inauthenticity through their usage of Instagram.

Literature Review

Before examining the effect of social media (specifically Instagram) on college sorority women, it is important to consider the effect of social media on college students, and why the impact of self-esteem is an important factor to consider. The worry about the usage of social media among college students comes from the presence of a current “mental health crisis” found on college campuses in the United States, as evidenced by the significant increase in college students being treated for mental health issues. Kruisselbrink Flat (2013) reported a trend in literature and reports from mental health counselors at universities since 2001 that the dependence on the internet and social media has made it more difficult for students to function normally and socially in real life, thus causing issues such as depression, isolation, and lowered self-esteem.

There also has been a link found between social connection and self-esteem as predictors for depression among college students that has been discussed recently in pop culture. For example, there was a recent New York Times article that discussed the recent mental health crisis among teens, that cited social media as a possible cause for this issue, as in person social connection is essential to one’s development and well-being (Richtel, 2022). Williams and Galliher (2006) also found that feeling socially connected improves sociability and the ability to have positive relationships; among 272 college students, social competence and connectedness predicted levels of both self-esteem and depression. Studies such as the ones mentioned above suggest that social media has an effect on one’s mental health through the social connection or lack thereof that one perceives to receive on these sites, and how those interactions impact their self-esteem.

Gender has an impact on levels of self-esteem and thus depression as well. The second suspected reasoning behind the increase in mental health issues for college students was an increased female population on college campuses (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). The increased rates of mental health issues and increase in female population are correlated, as Kessler (2003) found that women are more prone than men to mood and internalizing disorders such as depression at a ratio of 2:1. Additionally, their rates of depression are more accurately and widely reported as women are more likely to seek care for their mental health based on societal expectations of gender roles, in that women are not seen as weak when they are more connected to their emotions and ask for help, compared to constructions of masculinity that value strength and independence (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013).

Similarly, research by Dixon and Robinson Kurpius (2008) found that among 455 college students ranging from 18-23 years of age, rates of depression were higher among women and that rates of self-esteem, as well as assessment of mattering, as in how important one feels to others around them, predicted rates of depression. They also found that women's sense of mattering was more of a protective factor against depression and stress than in men. Therefore, since there is a trend of college-aged women being more likely to develop depression, and the mental impact of interpersonal relationships and self-esteem is more significant in this gender category, it is important to research the connection between self-esteem rates and the social life of college women specifically.

There is conflicting literature about the relationship college students have with social media, and how their online behavior affects them. Wang and colleagues (2015)

found, in a sample of 48 college students, that the students checked social media sites on average 118 times a day, with younger students using social media more often than older ones. They also found that although participants reported using social media to destress, the habit of checking social media habitually led to stress, as students felt a lack of self-control and lowered productivity. Although these findings are significant, the study used a small sample size, so research should be expanded to see if the trend of age as a mediating variable for social media usage, as well as social media usage-induced stress, is consistent across larger groups. Similarly, Skogen and colleagues (2021) found that among teenagers and young adults, those who used image based apps like Instagram and Tik Tok were more likely to be concerned with their self-presentation on social media. This hyper focus on how they present themselves was also associated with depression and anxiety, and a lower quality of life, and women were more likely to experience this phenomenon.

In contrast, research conducted by Bumsoo Kim and Yonghwan Kim (2017) found a positive relationship between college students and social media usage, as it allowed for participants to better build their social standing by connecting with people outside their own social group, and thus this diversity of social connection was associated with a higher sense of well-being. The researchers predicted that feeling more connected to campus life through social media increased feelings of self-esteem and social support. This contradiction reflects a similar finding of women joining sororities, as Kase and colleges (2016) found that the recruitment process was anxiety-inducing for all involved, but those who were initiated into a sorority reported an increased sense of self-esteem, social support, and overall well being, compared to

those who were rejected, who experienced the opposite effect. However, this inflated sense of well-being returned to their baseline for many participants within the next few months post-recruitment. Since the research regarding how both social media and sorority membership helps or hurts the well-being of college students is unclear in its conclusions, it would be important to further explore Instagram as a social media platform and how it affects the well-being and self-esteem of college women in sororities, and if these trends consistently are impacted by age of participants.

Despite some research pointing to social media as helpful for social connectedness in college students, there is significant research about how high levels of social media use can negatively impact one's own understanding of their identity, and thus their self-esteem and self-worth. Gündüz (2017) analyzed how social media has become a part of the structure of our social life, and thus we are able to create a digital identity outside of our real identity, as people are able to express themselves more freely and with less social pressure. However, in a similar vein, being able to construct a digital identity can have an impact on one's personality if they are creating this identity while they are still developing their sense of self. Alzahrani and Bach (2014) proposed in their study that the excessive use of social media can be a negative experience for adolescents as at that age, they psychologically struggle with forming their own identity, and thus the promotion of popularity and status through social media can cause low self-esteem if they do not get the attention they desire. Adolescents can also feel more negatively about themselves by comparing themselves to other people, either their appearance or sociability, which are both often inauthentic on social media platforms and this negative self-worth can cause depression and anxiety (Alzahrani & Bach,

2014). Considering that the current generation of college students were the adolescents researched in this study, these findings are significant for the current question being investigated in this study.

The impact of social media platforms on identity building and self-esteem is important to the context of women in sororities currently, as they may have a predisposition to having an insecure identity and thus low-self esteem due to their social media use. A dissertation in 2017 used the concept of social identity theory and the psychological processes associated with it as a framework to explain behaviors and socialization of sorority members as a group, such as social identification, in which people distinguish their identity in a social group from their individualized self due to certain traits being favored by their peers (Thompson, 2017). Sorority women's high usage of social media and Instagram decreases their ability to individualize their identities apart from their social group affiliation, as they must always present as a sorority "girl" in order to sell the preferred narrative of their sorority affiliation. Thus, if women in sororities are unable to have a secure identity of self apart from their group categorization and rely on social approval, then it is important to research how the self-esteem rates of this group are correlated with their relationship to Instagram and their usage behaviors.

There is limited research on exactly how Greek affiliation impacts the behaviors of college women on social media and Instagram, but there is research on how young adults behave on social media in order to gain popularity or approval. One study conducted in 2020 found that among 307 young adults who participated, over 60% engaged in deceptive like-seeking behavior on social media sites, manipulating how

they presented content on social media in order to gain more interaction with the post and more popularity (Dumas et al., 2020). The researchers also found that those who engaged in this type of behavior on social media were more likely to have low self-esteem and a decreased sense of belonging among their peers, thus showing that this inauthentic display of popularity on social media affects how they perceive themselves, even into adulthood.

Similarly, research by Ahmed et al. (2021) found that self-esteem was negatively associated with social avoidance, and there was a correlation between social avoidance and excessive or problematic social media use, thus suggesting that the overuse of social media sites can reduce one's social confidence and self-esteem. These findings were consistent among their study of 363 university students from Bangladesh, and they found that women were more likely to be socially avoidant (Ahmed et al. 2021). Another study, that aimed to look at the relationship between narcissism, self-esteem, and addictive social media behavior among adults of all ages, with a mean age of 35.8, further proved this trend, as they found that across a much larger sample size of about 23,000 participants, the lower one's self-esteem was self-reported, then the more likely they were to be addicted to social media (Andreassen et al., 2017). Although this study's participant pool was large and diverse, they found that consistent with previous studies, younger people and women were more likely to adopt addictive social media behaviors, thus further suggesting that there is an association between young adult women, social media use, and self-esteem, that should be examined further.

Hana McGuire in her study in 2017, explained that social media allows one to curate a particular image of themselves through modifying or highlighting their

appearance, and college women in particular use this strategy to achieve more likes and followers. She also found that women are more likely to be impacted by pressures of conforming to gender expectations, and thus social media increases the threat of social disapproval and thus, increases like-seeking behavior among college women (McGuire, 2017). Part of the gender expectations women feel pressure conforming to include having a good body image, and Amelia Couture Bue (2020) found that women's use of Instagram can lead to body dissatisfaction. Instagram breeds an environment for social comparison based on image, and consistent usage of the app causes women to focus more on parts of their body that produce anxiety about unattractiveness for them. Therefore, they monitor and judge themselves more frequently, and "may begin to undervalue the self when making social comparisons," (Couture Bue, p. 9, 2020). Thus, Instagram usage can create negative mental pathways that can lower one's self-esteem.

In conclusion, based on the existing literature, there is evidence to suggest that social media negatively impacts college students' mental health, and self-esteem is the most prevalent mediating factor for this outcome. The research also points to the fact that this impact can be affected by sex and age, in particular, that younger students are more likely to use social media, and that women are more likely to report issues with psychological disorders such as depression. According to these researchers, a concern about how much one matters, at least as measured by social media, is more commonly reported by women than by men. However, there is a gap in research that looks at how all these variables are connected, as well as limited research on how social media impacts the self-esteem of women affiliated with Greek life.

This research paper aims to fill that gap in existing literature by examining the relationship between social media usage and college sorority women's self-esteem.

Methods

In order to research the effects of Instagram on college women in sororities' self-esteem, members of sororities at a large public state university were recruited and asked to participate by filling out a survey. This survey was completed digitally, through Google Forms, and it aimed to assess participants' self-esteem, as well as their personal experience with Instagram, regarding how much time they spend on Instagram and their frequency in posting, as well as their social interactions on the app. The survey also documented demographic questions, including age, gender, racial identity and their affiliation with the university and with Greek life, and what year of university they are in. In order to assess self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale was used, which is a 10-item questionnaire using a Likert scale, in which people answer each question with a number 0-3, 0 equating to strongly agree, 1 to agree, 2 to disagree, and 3 to strongly disagree. Half of the questions were reverse scored, and thus the sum of the individual's score was calculated; a higher score equates to higher self-esteem. The scale has internal reliability, with a coefficient of reproducibility of .92, and also has good validity as it correlates significantly with other scales of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). The questions used for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, as well as all other questions for the survey and interview are contained in Appendix 1.

The next portion of the survey assessed the individual's Instagram usage, and a Likert scale recorded the frequency in which they used the app and how they did so. There were three questions, the first being about how often the participant scrolled through their Instagram feed, then about how much they posted a permanent photo/video on their feed, and lastly how much they posted on their Instagram story,

which is a post that is only visible for 24 hours. The scale was such that 1 equated to never, 2 to once or twice in a while, 3 to once or twice weekly, 4 to four to five times weekly, and 5 equated to daily. The sum of these scores was calculated to be a standard Instagram Usage score, originally created for this specific research project by the principal investigator. There were also short answer questions, asking the participants how many followers they had on their profile, how many people they followed, as well as how many likes on their posts and views on their story they receive on average, in order to assess their popularity on the app. Lastly, there was a section of yes or no questions, asking if the individual's account was public, if they knew a majority of their followers and if they knew a majority of the people they follow, as well as if they feel emotionally and/or socially supported from their interactions on Instagram. These questions were used to assess their Instagram's connection to their social life. Participants were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview for further questioning.

For participants that agreed to be interviewed, a Zoom call was scheduled between them and the principal investigator, and they were asked five standard questions, along with follow-up questions based on the participants' initial responses. Interviews were recorded with each participant's consent, and the conversations lasted roughly 15-30 minutes. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Do you feel pressure around what you post on Instagram? If so, where does that pressure come from?
2. Have your usage behaviors changed since joining a sorority? Do you feel as though you post more or less? Do you think more about what you post?

3. Do likes, followers, and views on your stories matter to you? Is your personal perception of your sociability, likableness, or popularity attached to those numbers at all?
4. Is your self-esteem or self-image impacted if your posts do not have as much engagement as you would typically expect?
5. Do you feel as though there are any rules or expectations for you in terms of your Instagram content due to your affiliation with your sorority?

In order to recruit participants for the survey and interview research process, members of sororities were contacted through each chapter's Facebook or Instagram pages, depending on which social media was used the most often. Presidents of sorority chapters at the university were also contacted by email when provided on their personal website sponsored by the university. The recruitment process was completed over the course of two months; attempts to contact sororities through social media were largely unsuccessful. Due to the unexpected difficulty in obtaining sorority participation, a change of planned methodology occurred, thus the final sample was obtained mostly through a snowball technique, whereby one participant would recommend another and that one would recommend yet another, and so on. The principal investigator's personal connections to sorority chapters enabled the distribution of a few surveys via group chats. Finally, the PI shared her research idea on her personal Instagram story, and the Facebook page for the university's Class of 2022. The distribution of how many participants came from each source is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Recruitment Strategies for Participants and Distribution of Online Survey

Type of Recruitment Strategy	Date of Initiation	Number of Participants from Recruitment Strategy
Group Chat for Sorority #1	February 3 rd , 2022	7
Group Chat for Sorority #2	February 15 th , 2022	7
Group Chat for Sorority #3	March 31 st , 2022	6
Personal Connections	March 29 th , 2022	9
Personal Instagram Story Post	March 27 th , 2022	12

Results

Forty-four students responded to the survey, and 41 of the responses were able to be analyzed, as three were excluded due to failure to respond to all survey questions. Eleven of the respondents offered to be interviewed, and seven of the eleven participated in a full interview. Of the respondents, 39 identified as female, equating to 95.1 percent of participants. A majority of the respondents were 21 years old, thus 48.78% of the study's participants. 31.71% of respondents were 22, 14.63% were 19, and 4.88% were 18 years old. Respectively, 75.61% of respondents were in their last year of undergraduate study. Twenty-seven (65.85%) identified as white, and 12.20% of respondents identified as both white and Asian/Pacific Islander. Two respondents identified as both white and Hispanic or Latinx, and one respondent identified as white, Hispanic/Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander. One respondent each identified as the following racial categories: Iranian, Hispanic or Latinx, Puerto Rican, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American, and Black/African American. A majority of the respondents were affiliated with a sorority (58.54%), but 17 participants were not.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scores ranged from 2 to 30 points, with a mean of 14.56, which is just under the exact middle score of 15. As for the women who are in sororities, the mean self-esteem score was 15.18, whereas the individuals not affiliated with Greek life had a mean self-esteem score of 13.87, and this difference is displayed in Figure 2. As for the Instagram Usage score calculated with the Likert scale, the scores ranged from 3 to 12 with a mean score of 9.15. There was only a very small difference between the mean of Instagram usage scores of individuals affiliated with

Greek life (9.12), and those who are not (9.17), and no significant difference between ages or school years among Instagram usage scores, as sophomores had an average of 10 at the highest, and juniors had an average of 8 at the lowest. The main two variables considered in this study, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem score and the Instagram Usage Score, are compared in Figure 1. There was no significant association between these two variables. The number of people respondents followed on Instagram ranged from 250 to 2,200, with the numbers of followers ranging from 90 to 65000. Also, more people reported feeling emotionally and/or socially supported by the interactions on the app, and this number was much higher in those who were affiliated with Greek life or in a sorority, as only 7 out of 17 not in a sorority felt supported, whereas 16 out of 24 in a sorority also felt supported.

INSTAGRAM USAGE SCORE vs. RSE SCORE

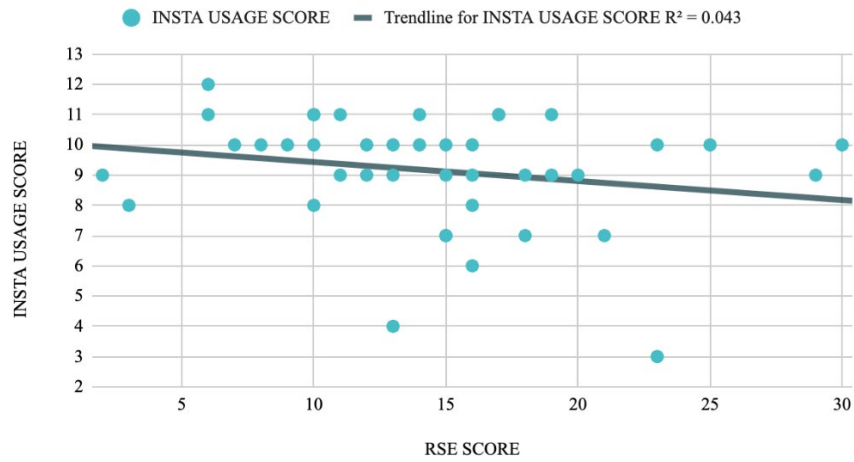


Figure 1: Association between Instagram Usage Score and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Score

Sorority Affiliation vs. RSE Score

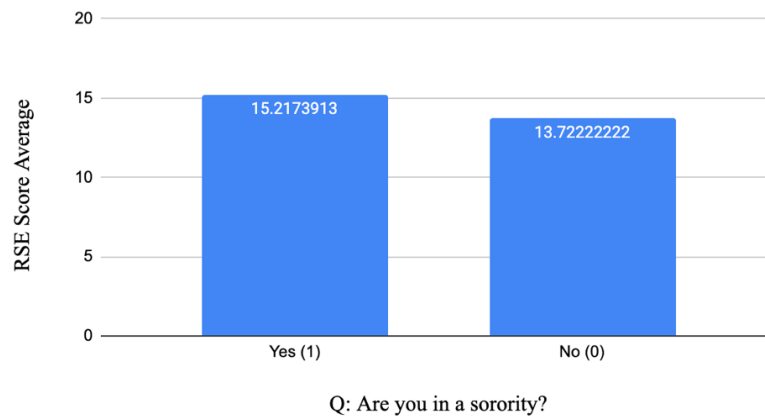


Figure 2: Difference between averages of Rosenberg Self-Esteem score for participants with sorority affiliation and those not affiliated with a sorority.

One advantage of the small sample size is that it is possible to look at and summarize individual cases for analysis. The minimum and maximum of the self-esteem scores are the most curious, as we can look to their corresponding participants' Instagram usage and relationship with the app, as well as their demographic variables to

see if there is a pattern and possible reasons as to why their scores are so low or high. The lowest self-esteem score recorded out of all survey responses was a 2 out of 30 possible points, which will be referred to as Case One.

Case One, is a white, 22-year-old female in her senior year, unaffiliated with a sorority. According to her survey responses, she reports being on the Instagram app daily, but only posts on her story or feed occasionally, which makes her Instagram usage score to be 9, which is less than one full point below the mean. She claims to have about 1500 followers and is following approximately 200 fewer than that, and averages at about 350 likes when she does post. However, despite her feeling as though she knows a majority of her followers and who she follows, she reports that she does not feel emotionally and socially supported on Instagram.

The second lowest self-esteem score reported was a score of 3, and will be referred to as Case Two. Case Two is a white female 19-years-old sophomore and is in a sorority. Her Instagram usage score was calculated to be 8, and more specifically, she looks on her Instagram feed every day and interacts with others posts, but only posts on her own feed and story every once in a while, less than on a weekly basis. Her Instagram usage score is slightly below the mean score as well. She reported further in the survey that she roughly has both 2,000 followers and is following 2,000 people, and she averages about 300 likes and views on her posts and stories. Her account is not public, but she does not feel as though she knows who she follows and who follows her. She responded “no” to the survey question asking if she felt emotionally and socially supported by her interactions on Instagram.

Case Two volunteered to be interviewed to give a more personal account of her relationship with Instagram and Greek life, and her responses contrasted interestingly with how one might have interpreted her data from the survey alone. Despite her low self-esteem score, when asked if her likes or views on her stories matter to her and her image of her own self-worth, she responded that they do not impact her all that much, and she rarely feels pressure around what she posts, except a slight pressure to conform to the typical aesthetic sorority girl Instagram feed. She is introspective and self-aware of her reasoning behind this however, as she shared,

I actually deleted Instagram for a month and a half at the end of 2021, and that helped me a lot to detach, so I think I might answer differently before that time, but I detached myself and now I don't really go on it as much or check that kind of stuff (as in likes, views, etc.).

She reports being hyper aware, especially now, in how the app impacts her self-esteem, as she only notices changes in how she thinks about herself when she opens the app again. She claims,

I look at influencers, and will be like 'Oh my god her body looks like that, her skin looks like that' and then I catch myself, because I don't really think like that on a day to day basis anymore, and then when I go back on my Instagram and go back on my feed and I catch myself thinking like that, so I realize clearly this is a social media moderated thing, so I just turn it off.

Perhaps because of her struggles with self-esteem issues and possible mental health problems resulting from that, she is more self-aware of the source of stress and has thus made an active choice to move away from heavy usage of the app to improve her sense of self-worth. The self-comparison she experiences with influencers on the app is damaging, and despite her knowing that the lives that they curate on their profile are inauthentic, it does not alleviate the damage.

In contrast, there are a couple of respondents who reported self-esteem scores very high on the scale. Case Three has a self-esteem score of 30, which is the highest possible score. She is a white 21-year-old senior, and she is affiliated with Greek life. She has an Instagram Usage Score of 10 out of 15, and for her this means she reported on the survey that she scrolls through her feed and interacts with it daily, and she posts on her story at least once weekly, but she only posts on her own feed occasionally. She is following just under 1500 people and has over 2000 followers on her account. She averages over 400 likes on her posts, and about 650 views on her weekly stories. Her account is public, so she does not know a majority of her followers and who she follows, and interestingly, she reported that she does not feel supported by her interactions on Instagram.

Case Four, with the second highest reported self-esteem score of 29, displays similar survey responses to Case Three in terms of her Instagram usage and statistics. Case Four is an 18-year-old female, who identifies as both white and Asian/Pacific Islander, and who is a freshman in a sorority. She received an Instagram usage score of 9, meaning that she also interacts with her feed daily, but only posts to her story or her own feed occasionally. She claims that she has just over 2000 followers and is following over 1500 people, and she receives over 500 likes on her posts, and 650 views on her story on average. She reports that her account is public, that she does not personally know her followers or who she follows. In contrast to Case Three however, she does feel supported emotionally and socially by her Instagram interactions.

Apart from the minimums and maximums of the self-esteem scores reported, another important data point to consider is the highest Instagram usage score, which

was 12 out of a 15-point scale; the participant with this score will be called Case Five. To look further at that score, it was calculated from the respondent's survey reports of interacting with their feed three or four times a week, posts on their own feed once or twice a week, and posts on their story daily. Case Five is a 21-year old-female and is a senior affiliated with a sorority on campus. She is following just above 1,000 people and has over 1,600 followers on Instagram. She also reported receiving an average of 350 likes on her posts, and about 550 views on her stories. Her account is public, but she feels as though she does know most of her followers and who she follows, and also that she feels emotionally and socially supported by her Instagram interactions. However, it is important to consider that her self-esteem score was calculated to be 6, which is below the mean by about 8 points, and is the third lowest self-esteem score reported.

The second highest Instagram usage score is 11, of which there were 7 total participant scores of 11. One of the participants with a score of 11 agreed to be interviewed further about their relationship with Instagram and will be called Case Six. Based on the survey data, Case Six identifies as a female, she is both white and of Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity and is a 19-year-old sophomore in a sorority. Her self-esteem score of 19 out of 30 is above the mean by almost 5 points. Looking further into her Instagram usage score, she reported looking through her feed daily and only posting on her own feed occasionally, but she also reported posting on her Instagram story three to four times a week. She follows just under 700 people, and has about 550 followers, and therefore gets between 150-200 likes and views on her posts and stories. Her Instagram account is public, but she answered that she feels as though she knows a

majority of her followers and who she follows, and thus reports that she feels emotionally and/or socially supported through her Instagram interactions.

Through Case Six's interview responses, it is interesting to see how her high self-esteem score manifests in terms of how she feels about her Instagram posts and interactions. When asked how much the number of likes and views she receives matters to her, she responded that she doesn't "care that much about numbers,". She is self-aware that she catches herself worrying about her engagement from time to time, but said "I'm trying my best to not, because I know it doesn't really matter." It appears that her affiliation with a sorority is what causes her the most pressure and self-consciousness when it comes to her Instagram posts, as she is concerned about following a certain stereotype of what a sorority girl is, in order to represent her chapter well. She explains,

I also do feel some pressure being in the sorority, to post the stereotypical sorority pictures, like doing the sorority squat, and to put on a more happy persona, because I feel like that's what sorority girls are thought of as, especially with their Instagram. I definitely have felt some pressure, but nothing from people in particular, but just from the general stereotype of a sorority girl.

She is also aware that at times, this pressure to be a bubbly sorority girl can cause inauthenticity in her Instagram posts and social interactions overall, as she discusses times where she felt like she had to put on a good face for the sake of her chapter or hold back her thoughts in order to fit into the idea of the sorority, however it seems as though much of these concerns happen outside of Instagram specifically, which could explain why she still feels socially supported by her followers and interactions on the app.

Case Seven, who is also the third interviewee, has some similar demographical identifiers to Case Six, in that she is also a 19-year-old sophomore in a sorority with an Instagram usage score of 11, but she identifies as white. However, the most important note taken from her survey responses, which differs greatly from Case Six and is an outlier throughout all of the data, is that she follows just under 1000 people, but has almost 66,000 followers on Instagram. She reports getting roughly 15,000 likes on her posts and 10,000 views on her stories. Her account is public, and she answered that she knows who she follows, but unsurprisingly, does not personally know her followers. Lastly, she reports feeling emotionally and socially supported through Instagram interactions, but this is an important answer to investigate, as her interview responses tell a different story.

When Case Seven was asked if she feels pressure around what she posts on Instagram, she enthusiastically responded yes, and claimed that “people are very judgmental and rude on the internet, no matter what you post, people will criticize you for it.” Although it is a normal concern of college aged women today to worry about criticism, especially ones in a sorority where they are under more of a microscope, rarely does that judgement ever come to fruition, and the worry is more about whispers behind their back or strange looks. However, this participant is a rare case, as with the amount of followers she has, she is exposed to real criticism from strangers online, and expresses that she feels like she always “wants to be your best self, so they don’t have as much to criticize.”¹ However, she claims that a majority of the people who interact

¹ Case Seven shared during her interview that she has a high amount of followers on her Instagram account due to her mother’s fame through television. She also has a Tik Tok account that is rather popular, which also contributes to her high follower count.

with her posts are kind to her and shared having a supportive community on other social media apps apart from her Instagram, which may be where her response of feeling socially and emotionally supported came from, as she is receiving a lot of positive attention, and more than the average person. She did share that she does not feel as though much of that positive attention comes from her sorority sisters. She shares that she used to post a lot more on her Instagram, and much more freely:

I used to just spam my story with anything I thought was funny...but now having more followers and joining a sorority, that's a little more frowned upon, because people are like 'That's really weird, why are you doing that?' So ever since I joined [sorority name redacted], I have been super self-conscious about what I post, because we have to represent the sorority well, we can't post anything that would leave a bad taste in people's mouths,

She further expressed a general feeling that she does not feel as though she is as naturally social or friendly as her other sorority sisters, so she feels on Instagram, and in real life, at events or parties, she has to edit herself in order to fit the idealized image better. Overall, it is worth further exploring how she does not feel emotionally or socially supported in her interactions in real life with her current social group, but does online, despite her possible inauthenticity.

The next cases explored, Case Eight and Case Nine are rather similar in their demographics and survey responses but differ in their interview responses. Case Eight is a Black 22-year-old female who is a senior affiliated with a sorority on campus. Her self-esteem score came out to be about 15, which is very close and slightly above the mean. Her Instagram usage score is only 7, as she only goes on the app a few times a week, and rarely to never posts on her feed, but will occasionally post on her Instagram story. She follows about 1,500 people, and has under 1,200 followers on her account.

She averages at just about under 350 likes and views on her posts and stories. Her account is private, and she feels as though she knows a majority of her followers and who she follows, and she also does feel emotionally and socially supported by her interactions on the app.

Based on her interview responses, it seems as though Case Eight is very aware of how Instagram can affect her, and thus tries to stay away from it, explaining her low Instagram usage score. She claims that she tries her best to not think about how the amount of engagement her posts get makes her feel, as she feels as though she has a strong social life outside of the app, and does not need to be further validated through the app. She observed:

I definitely feel like its a trap almost, you know, like ‘No one likes me, they don’t like my photo so they don’t like me’ but then I realize, that is not real, it's just social media, and I think if it does affect you like that, that's taking it too far, which is why my involvement isn’t that much because I don’t want it to control my life like that, and the way I view myself

Instagram as “a trap” is a powerful statement, as it is evident throughout her whole interview, as well as her average self-esteem score that she is not overly insecure about herself and her social life in general, but the app can make her feel that way, as much as she admits she like to deny it. Therefore, it is a conscious effort to separate herself from the app, but she can only be hyper aware of its effects because she was never very entangled in it in the first place.

Case Nine identifies as a female, and she is both white and Hispanic/Latinx. She is a 22-year-old in her senior year at the university and has been a part of a sorority for the past 4 years. Her self-esteem score was also 15, which is just slightly above the

mean of all self-esteem scores. Her Instagram usage score is slightly below the mean, at 9 points, meaning that she is on Instagram daily, but only posts on her story and her feed every once in a while. She has roughly 1,000 followers and is following a similar number of people. She averages at about 300 likes per post, and over 500 views on her stories. Her account is private, and therefore she reports that she knows a majority of her followers and who she follows, but despite this, she does not feel emotionally or socially supported by her interactions on the social media app.

Based on her interview, Case Nine is aware of the pressure that comes from posting on Instagram, which is potentially why she does not feel emotionally supported by her friends on the app. However, she shares that she felt this stress before joining the sorority however:

I think for me, it started back in high school, because I went to an all girls school, and it was private so people were coming from all different backgrounds. You would have people posting that they got a Range Rover for their 16th birthday, so you just see that and instantly compare yourself to it. Its just always in the back of my head, that I need to portray this lifestyle, not exactly of extravagance, but fun and cool.

Instagram then has never been a casual experience for her, and she always has felt as though she has to sell her life to seem better than it actually is. However, as reflected by her average self-esteem score, she does not let her Instagram account affect her too much, as she reflected that she does not feel worse about herself if she does not get many likes or comments on her posts as she would expect, but claims “It definitely boosts me up if I do get a lot of nice comments or something.” She does not post all that often, which is perhaps why she does not experience this enough to take support from these interactions, but it is

important to note that the app only heightens her self-esteem in the short term, and never decreases her self-esteem.

The next two cases also have similar stories, as they are both 21-year-old white seniors that identify as female who were once in a sorority at the university at but chose to de-affiliate, which will be further explored through their interview responses. Starting with Case Ten, based on her survey responses, her self-esteem score is 15. Her Instagram usage score was recorded as 10, meaning that she is on the app every day and posts on her story once or twice a week, but only posts on her own feed occasionally. She follows under 800 people, but has just under 1,300 followers. She receives around 250 likes but receives double that on the views on her stories. Her account is private, and she reports that she knows a majority of her followers and who she follows. She also feels emotionally and socially supported by her Instagram interactions.

Case Ten agrees that she feels a lot of pressure around what to post on Instagram, and although she feels as though some of that came from her time in a sorority, she claims that overall the pressure comes within. She reported that the pressure “being self-inflicted is based on having society make it that way. I think ever since high school social media has always been a popularity game, and there is always stress around it.” She recalled that during her time in the sorority, she felt a similar stress, that was not fully alleviated until leaving. Like her fellow peers, she too felt like she had to fit the sorority girl aesthetic, so she often had to mull over the posts she made, whereas now, she feels free to post whatever she wants. However, that pressure still lingers, of how many likes she will get and who she will see it, and according to her, “that’s why I just don’t post anymore.” Despite being on the app daily and feeling

freer to express herself, the weight of an Instagram photo is still too much, and keeps her from participating in her feed.

The last case, Case Eleven, was only in a sorority for a portion of her freshman year. Her survey responses showed that her self-esteem score was 10, which is about 4 points below the mean. Her Instagram usage score came out to be 10, as she uses the app daily, and posts on her story on a weekly basis, but only she posts on her feed every once in a while. She follows less than 700 people, and has just under 1200 followers. She averages at over 200 likes on her posts, and more than double that for views on her stories. Her account is private, and she feels as though she knows a majority of who she follows and who followers her, but she does not feel emotionally or socially supported by the app.

Case Eleven showed more clearly why she does not feel emotionally or socially supported by the app, both now and during her time in a sorority. She shares similar sentiments as Case Ten, in that she “felt like I was in a spotlight” when she was in a sorority, but she still felt like she had to post for the sake of the chapter and proving her sociability. However, now she doesn’t take her Instagram content too seriously, but in her words,

I feel a lot of pressure around what I post on Instagram, and it makes me post less. I just overthink everything I post, I start to overthink what I'm doing and the caption, and just everything. Also, this sounds shallow, but the likes and views too.

Across almost all of these cases, there is a sentiment that the likes and views do matter, and that they are paying attention to it, but they are aware that it is not good for them.

It seems as though none of them want the app to dictate their own feelings of their popularity or of their self-esteem, but despite that, it still gets to them, regardless of their social groups and who they are.

Discussion

In this study, the survey distributed offered valuable information regarding the impacts of Instagram on college women's self-esteem and the possible difference for women in sororities, despite the findings not revealing what was expected. I hypothesized that women in sororities would have a higher Instagram usage score than women not affiliated with Greek life, as well as a lower self-esteem score, but the data did not support this hypothesis. There was no significant correlation between these two variables, showing that high Instagram usage cannot be a predictor of low self-esteem, and vice versa. In addition, the average self-esteem scores among participants who claimed to be affiliated with Greek life were about 1.3 points higher than those who were not. This finding supports the findings of Kase and colleagues (2016), as when they examined women who were successful in the sorority recruitment process and those who were not, they found that women who were more extroverted and had higher self-esteem were more likely to be recruited. Those who were unsuccessful or chose not to rush had lower levels of self-esteem. It appears that being part of a sorority takes a certain amount of confidence and security. It is difficult to assess the impact of Instagram on their self-esteem when it is already higher than average.

It is interesting to consider the confidence it takes to be in a sorority when analyzing the data provided from Case One, who had the self-esteem score of two, the lowest score reported, but was one of the few cases not affiliated with Greek life. Despite this, she still has around 1,500 followers whom she claims to know personally, so her survey data indicates that she is extraverted and socially popular. Case One could be a prime example of how the view of Instagram popularity can be inauthentic, as

despite her receiving many likes and follows from people whom she knows, she still feels like a social outcast on the app, and her self-esteem is hindered in the process. Despite her negative feelings toward the app and her insecurities, she still uses the app daily, which could be feeding into her insecurity and self-comparison. She rarely posts, which demonstrates this lack of confidence, but without access to her personal account, it is difficult to analyze exactly where the reluctance to post comes from. However, interview responses for other participants that will be discussed later could be applied to this case.

However, Case One's amount of time spent on the app is average compared to the other participants, so this trend may be common with or without a low self-esteem score. The amount of time the participants spent on Instagram, measured through their self-reporting of how often they used the app and how often they posted on their feed and stories, averaged to roughly the same between women in sororities and women who were not affiliated with Greek life. There was no significant difference between the ages in terms of Instagram usage, so it seems as though affiliation with a sorority does not make women more likely to be more active on the app, and it does not change within the four years at a university either. At least at this large public university, it seems as though college women use Instagram about the same amount, regardless of their identity or social life.

Based on survey data, the finding that Instagram usage stayed consistent regardless of the self-esteem score is seen in Cases Three and Four, the two highest self-esteem scores, both with Instagram usage scores less than one point over or under the average of 9.15. Both cases are also affiliated with Greek life, thus further supporting

the claim that sorority women are inherently more confident. Case Three is an interesting one, as she has rather similar but higher Instagram stats in terms of followers and likes compared to Case One, but she reports that she also does not gain any sense of social or emotional support from her followers. Because she did not agree to be interviewed, it is difficult to make a clear analysis of her survey data, but there is an interesting paradox between her perfect self-esteem score and the lack of social support from Instagram. We can deduce that perhaps she does not attach her sense of her own popularity and sociability to her interactions on Instagram and rather finds the source for her own validation from her in-person social interactions. This is likely due to the fact that she does not personally know a majority of her followers, so she is able to separate her sense of likeability on the app and in real life, as she is receiving that information from two separate sources.

This analysis can be supported by Skogen and colleagues' findings (2021) that found that a strong focus on self-presentation on social media apps like Instagram is correlated with mental health issues and a lower quality of life, which low self-esteem can predict. Due to Case Three's high self-esteem, she likely does not focus on how she presents herself on Instagram and therefore is not concerned with the social support she perceives on the app. It is also possible that due to her moderate popularity on the app, she is secure in her feelings about her Instagram interactions, and thus rarely must consider how a low number of likes, views, or followers can reflect on her image and therefore her self-esteem and security.

It is interesting that the two highest scores in self-esteem reported similar Instagram statistics and usage, but their social interactions on the app make them feel

differently. Case Four, with one self-esteem point lower than Case Three at 29, reported contrastingly that she does feel socially and emotionally supported by her interactions on Instagram. Thus, her high self-esteem could be due to her popularity and positive relationship with the Instagram app. She may feel socially supported in her real life, and her Instagram feed is not a deterrent to that, whether she feels attached to the numbers of followers she receives. Similarly, because she rarely receives a low number of likes or views, has many people supporting her, and also does not post often, she likely does not have to consider how any lower average would make her feel about her own self-image.

However, when comparing these last two cases to Case Five, who had the highest Instagram usage score (12 out of 15), and who reported a low self-esteem score of 6 out of 30, it is possible that self-esteem can be impacted at the extremes of social media use. Since Case Five is posting something either on her story or feed every single day, she seems more entangled with her self-perception and the creation of her digital identity than in the previous cases. With just her survey data, we cannot know her possible struggles with mental health issues, but considering that her low self-esteem score and gender are predictors for these conditions, it is possible that her high Instagram usage could affect how she perceives herself and her life (Skogen et al., 2021). This case also supports the findings of Andreassen and colleagues (2017), as they found that female students who have a low sense of self-esteem are more likely to be addicted to social media. Although based on survey data alone it's uncertain if her usage behaviors can be diagnosed as addictive, the connection between high social media use and low self-esteem is made clear here.

The survey data provided an outline of how we can understand this subject, but the interviews conducted added color and texture to the whole picture of the relationship between Instagram, sorority members, and identity. Across all seven interviews, there were commonalities in how the women described how the sorority dictated their life displayed on social media, and how that dynamic affected them. When the participants were asked whether they feel pressure around what they post on Instagram, all of them agreed that they have experienced that pressure at some point. However, the amount of pressure they feel, and where it comes from, differed across cases.

Both Case Two and Case Eight reflected that they felt very little to no amount of pressure around posting on Instagram, but they still recognized that it lingers, regardless of their attempts to ignore it. Case Two claims there is a “small standard” to look similar to her peers, and Case Eight claimed she did not want the people in her social life to dictate who she is, but how well the photo will do and how good she looks in the photo “definitely comes up subconsciously.” Case Two and Case Eight differ greatly in terms of self-esteem, as Case Two had the lowest score reported, and Case Eight received a score less than one point below the mean at 15. However, it is important to consider that Case Two was previously aware of the effect Instagram had on her self-worth, as she decided to delete it in order to detach herself from its impact and claimed that she “might have answered differently before that time.” Perhaps her previous answers would have then differed greatly from Case Eight, who seems to be more secure in her own self-image. Case Eight’s insights are important in the fact that although she is confident with herself, she claims that she would like to think that she

doesn't care about her Instagram success, but "you obviously do." It shows that although there may not be a specific pattern in self-esteem and Instagram usage, the impact of the app is invasive to the psyche, and it takes self-awareness and deliberate action to not let it affect its users.

The other interviewees admitted to feeling that pressure heavily, as there is a sense of feeling like every aspect of your post must be perfect. Both Case Nine and Case Ten felt as though that feeling existed before they got to college and joined a sorority, as they had to assimilate to their peers and what they would like. Case Eleven felt a similar sentiment, that they had to make sure their posts were cool enough and their captions funny enough, to get their expected engagement. That pressure has not gone away, however, despite being multiple years out of high school, and for Cases Ten and Eleven, being out of the sorority as well. There was also a pattern of the stress around posting becoming crippling, in that three out of the seven interviewees commented that they rarely post anymore due to second-guessing themselves and the quality of their photos, and two out of seven commented on never wanting to post that often.

Case Seven for example claimed that she hasn't posted since November 2021 because according to her,

I just hate a lot of the comments I get, I don't like the negativity around it so there's definitely pressure to make it as good as possible to limit the negativity that comes from it.

This case in particular faces more judgment and stress around her Instagram than the average person, due to her significant popularity on the app with more than 65,000 followers. She also is popular on another social media app, Tik Tok, and her fame there

is affecting her Instagram as well. She further commented on her reasoning for not posting:

Honestly, I just don't feel pretty right now. I have gained a few pounds since I last posted, and I tried to post a Tik Tok recently, and someone commented on my weight gain, and I don't even think its noticeable, but because of that I have not at all felt confident to post on social media in general. So, I have just been dealing with that, and waiting until I feel prettier to post.

This quote is one of the most explicit examples of the judgment that women can experience through Instagram, as the other interviewees commented on feeling a general sense of internal worry about their appearance in particular photos, but this is the only claim of avoiding posting due to direct negative feedback on her body. This finding supports Couture Bue's (2020) claim that Instagram usage can lead to body dissatisfaction and increased anxiety and attention to certain parts of themselves they see as unattractive. In Case Seven's situation, she feels as though she is not attractive due to her slight weight gain and therefore feels as though she is unworthy of publicly promoting her image unless she is perfect, or at least feels better about herself.

Apart from how the stress around their pictures, a majority of the interviewees agreed that their affiliation with a sorority also affected their posting behaviors, in terms of frequency for some, and content for others. Case Eight reported that when she first joined a sorority during her freshman year, she felt as though she had to post more because "everyone else was posting," and she felt like getting a good photo was dictating her life, in that "every time I went out or every event was a moment to post." She felt as though this was unnatural for her, as she typically does not post often and does not judge her own success in her social life based on her social media interactions. However, she reflected that when she was more involved with the sorority,

I would spend my day waiting for a good moment, whether that's being outside or being in a certain location, and I always get dressed up and try to look however I want to look, but I'd be making a point to look a certain way to make a post, like do my hair a certain way or my makeup a certain way, just to post something,

Case Eight was engaging in a certain type of deceptive like-seeking behavior, in that she was not living her life fully and authentically, but rather only living to showcase it online. Similarly, she is editing her appearance to look better in potential photos.

It is a common social occurrence where one can present themselves inauthentically, such as promoting a more agreeable set of beliefs and views, and thus a more agreeable personality in order to gain social favor. Gil-Or and colleagues (2015) researched that people often use social media to project a “false-self” that protects them from the vulnerability of revealing their authentic, true identity. This 2015 study also found that people with lower self-esteem were more likely to present themselves inauthentically through social media. According to Dumas and colleagues in their 2020 study, young adults are less likely to feel confident in themselves as well as feeling like they belong among their peers if they use inauthentic strategies to gain more likes and engagement.

Despite Case Eight knowing that her Instagram account does not reflect her social life, she still feels as though if she does not get as many likes as she would expect, people don't like her. Therefore, changing her image to gain more popularity on the app makes her feel less secure in her relationships with her peers. Case Two admitted to engaging in similar behaviors since joining the sorority, as she is concerned with making her feed look more aesthetically

pleasing, as this pattern is consistent among sorority girl's profiles. Although she posts the same amount, she "thinks a little longer" before posting, and claimed that she "definitely takes time editing photos for the color palette." Although not much is shared in her interview regarding her insecurities, we can deduce from her self-esteem score of three that she does not feel confident in her social circles.

Cases Two, Six, Seven, Ten, and Eleven all mentioned during their interviews that they felt as though they had to fit into a certain stereotype of being a sorority girl, and this impacts much of their posts. Case Six for example, felt as though through her Instagram account, she has "a responsibility to the entire chapter to have a good face out there for the sorority," and thus some of her content can be inauthentic or edited in some ways. According to Jennifer Gilmore in her 2002 master's thesis, "sororities... are image focused—it is a survival strategy" (Gilmore, 2002, 150). Membership is often based on appearance and fitting into the correct category of women in order to be a part of the sorority, as keeping up with this image is how they keep their reputation and status on campus, and how they build connections with other Greek life chapters. Case Eleven had a telling experience with this during her rush experience, in that her friend from a different university wrote her a letter of recommendation for the particular chapter she was in, and initially, she was highly prioritized during recruitment. However, she did not receive a bid, and she recalls the email they sent back in regards to why they did not choose her:

It said something along the lines of, "Thanks for your recommendation, but we didn't really like her and she didn't fit what we were looking

for.” So I feel like that's a huge thing, that they had this expectation, and then they met me and were like, oh, never mind.

It is clear that each chapter has a certain type that their members try to fit into, not only in person but on Instagram as well. Case Eleven also shared knowledge from her peers in leadership positions in sororities on campus that looking at potential new members' Instagrams is a large part of the recruitment selection process. If someone's profile does not fit their desired aesthetic, then that person will not be in that chapter. Therefore, who they are during the rush process as well as who they have presented themselves as before arriving at the university impacts their ability to be a part of these social groups.

Although the typical desired types and aesthetics for sorority girls may be vaguely ambiguous, it was clear throughout each interview that there are strict social media rules the chapter members must follow in order to represent their chapter well online. Case Nine reflected that during her first few years in the sorority, she would be required to post photos about recruitment or any other events happening, in order to promote the chapter. Case Seven reflected on a similar happening, where she would be asked to post infographics and other promotional posts for the sorority. There was a general theme across the interviews as well that there were restrictions on what you could post, as Case Two explained:

If you are under 21 you can't post alcohol or anything like that, and if you wanted to post something trashy, maybe save it for your close friend's story,

I discovered in my interview with Case Ten, that this was not just a general taboo that was shared between chapters, but it was in fact a signed agreement.

On bid day, you have to sign a social media contract. We weren't allowed to post anything with red solo cup, anything that referenced partying and drinking. But it got to the point where girls would post something at a frat party, Halloweekend, or even at a formal, and obviously, you are drinking. You would post a picture, and someone would send it in to the risk management person, and you would be forced to take it down.

It is clear that sororities make their members subscribe to a certain type of image, of being “courteous”, and not “trashy” or “rude or disrespectful,” (Interview with Case Eight, April 19th, 2022). However, as shared by Case Ten, that is not necessarily authentic. As McGuire (2017) discusses, based on popular media, sorority girls have this reputation of heavily being into partying and drinking, and this can be a crude perception at times. Although much of Greek life can be centered around parties and events that involve alcohol and drugs, the chapters want to avoid the bad press and stereotypes, and only want to promote the wholesome, positive aspects of being in a sorority.

The negative aspects of being in a sorority and on social media go beyond restrictions and inauthenticity however, and rather impact these women’s feelings of self-worth. A majority of the interviewees shared stories about how they felt pressured to post photos that resembled the other in the chapter, and if they did not receive enough engagement on the post from the members of their sorority, they would feel isolated. For example, when I asked Case Six how likes impacted their feelings of self worth and self-esteem, she

reflected that her peers outside of her chapter's engagement does not bother her much, but rather

I think most of time its people in sororities, because I get caught up in the idea of wanting to look like the image of a sorority girl, but not everyone fits the stereotype,

Despite not feeling like the sorority stereotype of being white, blond, and wealthy fits their persona or aesthetic, there is still pressure to conform in order to fit in (McGuire, 2017). Similarly, Case Seven felt this need to conform, as she shared that she needed to edit how she would naturally post in order to not feel like an outcast and present her sorority in the best way. Although she is used to people typically sharing their negative opinions about her online, when asked if anyone in the sorority made her feel that way about her posts, she responded,

I've never heard anyone say to me, that 'you're weird', but I read very deeply into body language and people's behavior, and sorority girls are very outgoing, or at least that's the stereotype. So, if people in my sorority aren't coming up to me and asking how I am and asking me to hang out, I feel like clearly there is something wrong with me, like if they are so extroverted, why are they not talking to me?

Both inside and outside of social media, there is a certain judgment that comes from other sorority members, and a certain pressure to fit into how they behave and present themselves. Even if people feel like they do not authentically fit into the type of their chapter, they have to put on a façade in order to fit in and be accepted.

This pressure to fit in through their social media can be seen most with Case Ten and Eleven, as they were once in a sorority, but no longer are, so they were able to reflect on how their behaviors have changed since being apart of that world. Case Ten reflected that

Likes did matter back then when I was in the sorority, because it was getting validation that I looked good in that picture. During recruitment, I wanted to post everyday to tell people to join my chapter, and talk about how much I love my sisters, and then I would be anxious about how many of my sorority sisters are actually going to comment on it.

It is clear through this account that although sororities promise that you will have many new friends and sisters once you join, that the interactions with their posts on Instagram matter in terms of if they believe it, or if “maybe it was just fake this whole time.” Case Ten further reflected that since she has been out of the sorority, her own perception of likeable-ness or popularity is no longer attached to the numbers of likes or comments she gets, as she is “not in competition anymore, so it doesn’t really matter.” Similarly, Case Eleven reflected that during her short time in her sorority, she felt that intense pressure that she was being judged solely based on her Instagram content. Now that she is out of it however, she feels that

Now it is my Instagram and I don’t have that kind of pressure. People are looking at it but people aren’t excluding me or judging me in the same way that they would in a sorority.”

From these two cases, it seems as though it is a more freeing experience to be out of the sorority, as they are able to more authentic in both their personality and how they present themselves on social media.

Miller (2006) reflected on the fact that the group membership within a sorority allows people to have the same sense of status that the group carries, which explains the appeal of sororities in general. It places them in their desired popular social scene as soon as they join. However, based on the responses from the interview questions, it feels as though the members of the sorority still do not feel secure in their spot in the social group once they join. Rather, they feel as though they continuously have to prove themselves to be worthy of the popularity and attention they are receiving, from either

their chapter members or other people within Greek life or the university as a whole. Their Instagram is one simple way to quantify that.

Limitations and Future Directions

For this thesis, due to time restrictions and the limited scope of an independent undergraduate research project, this design is not without limitations, so there are a number of avenues that should be explored further to get a more accurate picture of sorority women's relationship to Instagram and their self-esteem. First and foremost, I was hoping for a much larger sample size for my survey, and my original plan was to be able to complete significant statistical analysis on my data set. However, since I only received 44 respondents and only 41 viable data points from the original set, the methodology of this project had to change, as typical statistical tests done for a psychological research project such as this were no longer appropriate. The project became more of an analysis of ethnographic case studies and focused on individual college women both in sororities and not. Although the interview analysis was able to provide a more complex and interesting picture of the world of college Greek life and Instagram, the subject as a whole is complex and seemingly individual to each person, so therefore, it is possible that these results may only be relevant to this particular group or this particular university.

A main reason behind the small sample size for the study is that connecting to people in sororities and/or Greek life in general was much more difficult than originally anticipated. Due to the popularity and regular usage of social media apps such as Instagram and Facebook by sororities on this campus, it was incorrectly assumed that

reaching out to chapters through this avenue would be the best course of action, and I anticipated being able to get in contact with a majority, if not all, of the chapters available to me to get a more diverse sample. However, based on some interactions I had with some sorority members in senior positions, I learned that the chapters have a more complex bureaucratic system that anticipated that is hard to get through. Thus, due to the exclusivity of these groups, it was much harder to access the chapter members than I thought.

Further, ethnographic research combined with survey data seemed to cause some inconsistencies. For example, some participants responded that they felt supported by their interactions on Instagram, and then through their interview revealed the opposite, or vice versa. Similarly, for the survey data, I had some scores that went high above the median or mean, such as the highest Rosenberg self-esteem score at 30. It is possible that the survey responses, since they were self-reported, were not fully accurate. In self-reporting, people can respond in a way that they expect the research to want, so it may not be individualized data or accurate to them solely. Conversely, it is also possible that of the 41 responses I received, some did not respond with personal thought, analysis, or insight, and rather answered out of convenience. This pattern would be clearer with a larger sample size, and thus we could exclude data that was not as accurate as hoped.

As for future directions for the research project, it would be beneficial to have a significantly longer time horizon in order to infiltrate the sororities and make better connections in order to receive more participants for the survey data. More time could also offer a better understanding of the complex Greek life system, as it seems as

though sororities are a much more complex system than I was aware of until I started the research process. Therefore, with a better connection to Greek life and a larger sample size, the data could be understood more universally than they could from these case studies. Also, with more time, a longitudinal study would be an interesting approach, as it would be helpful to assess participants' self-esteem score and Instagram usage score and statistics across the years, perhaps across all 4 years of university, or throughout their time in a sorority, to see how it might change. Without data points from multiple times, or without a manipulated variable, it is difficult to assess exactly how the reports of self-esteem are affected. It is not possible to confidently conclude that low self-esteem scores can be caused by high Instagram usage, as these data points could be swayed by an unknown confounding variable.

Also, it may be beneficial to look at other variables when considering the survey and interview data, such as how race and gender presentation can affect one's self-esteem and confidence within the social group of one's sorority. Based on the finding that most sororities are aware of the stereotype of the typical women in the chapter as wealthy, white, and blond, it would be worth investigating how other genders, races, and classes felt about their security in their group, and compare that to those who did fit the typical stereotype. It would bring insights into what groups are accepted into these chapters and who isn't.

Lastly, some interview questions could have changed in order to receive more valuable insight. For example, the last question asked, regarding if chapter members had alternate Instagram accounts from their most public one, did not receive that many different responses, as a majority of the interviewees did not have more than one

account. In its place, it would have been more beneficial to ask more direct questions about self-esteem. For example, the finding that most women in sororities were overly concerned with their image, appearance, and body image was consistent throughout the interview responses, but was only touched on briefly. I would like to seek more insight regarding these topics, as it may have related to previous literature more closely and could be analyzed more in depth.

Appendix

Survey Questions

Demographics:

1. What is your gender identity?
☐ Male (0)
☐ Female (1)
☐ Nonbinary (2)
☐ Prefer not to say (3)
☐ Other (4)
2. How old are you? _____ (enter number)
3. What is your expected graduation year?
(dropdown categories: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, 5th year or above)
4. Please specify your primary (self-identified) race or ethnicity:
☐ White (1)
☐ Hispanic or Latino (2)
☐ Black or African-American (3)
☐ Asian or Pacific Islander (4)
☐ Other (5)
5. Are you affiliated with Greek life/ in a sorority chapter?
☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (0)

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale:

Please record the appropriate answer for each item, depending on whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with it.

0= Strongly agree 1 = Agree 2 = Disagree 3= Strongly disagree

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. _____
2. At times I think I am no good at all. _____
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities. _____
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people. _____
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. _____
6. I certainly feel useless at times. _____
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth. _____
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. _____
9. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure. _____

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself. ____

Instagram Usage:

In the past two weeks:

1. How often have you used Instagram (scrolling through your feed, liking posts, etc.)?

1-Never 2-Once or twice 3-once or twice a week 4-three to four times a week 5-Daily

2. How often do you post on your Instagram feed?

1-Never 2-Once or twice 3-once or twice a week 4-three to four times a week 5-Daily

3. How often do you post on your Instagram story?

1-Never 2-Once or twice 3-once or twice a week 4-three to four times a week 5-Daily

Short Answer: Please answer questions 4-7 with a number that most accurately describes you. You may look to your Instagram account for reference to make sure your answers are as accurate as possible.

4. How many people do you follow on Instagram? ____

5. How many Instagram followers do you have? ____

6. How many likes do you get on your Instagram posts on average? ____

7. How many views do you get on your Instagram stories on average? ____

8. Is your Instagram account public or private?

__ Yes (1)

__ No (0)

9. Do you know a majority of the people who follow you on Instagram?

__ Yes (1)

__ No (0)

10. Do you know the majority of people who you follow on Instagram?

__ Yes (1)

__ No (0)

11. Do you personally feel socially or emotionally supported by your interactions on Instagram?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (0)

12. Would you be willing to participate in a brief face-to-face interview as well?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (0)

If yes, please provide your email: _____

Interview Questions

1. Do you feel pressure around what you post on Instagram? If so, where does that pressure come from?
2. Have your usage behaviors changed since joining a sorority? Do you feel as though you post more or less? Do you think more about what you post?
3. Do likes, followers, and views on your stories matter to you? Is your personal perception of your sociability, likableness, or popularity attached to those numbers at all?
4. Is your self-esteem or self-image impacted if your posts do not have as much engagement as you would typically expect?
5. Do you feel as though there are any rules or expectations for you in terms of your Instagram content due to your affiliation with your sorority?

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