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BUSINESS, BELONGING, AND CULTURE WITHIN THE REALMS OF CULTURALLY
BASED FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS (CBFO)

A THESIS APPROVED FOR
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Abstract

This qualitative research study aimed to explore the membership experience of culturally based Greek organizations in relation to childhood upbringing and background. Through in-depth interviews with collegiate and alumni members, the study sought to understand what factors from childhood and cultural background motivates individuals to join a Culturally Based Fraternal Organizations (CBFO) and examines the themes of belonging and business within the overall CBFO membership experience. Information from this study is beneficial to understand the needs, motivations, and values of current members and future members. Leadership from national to local CBFOs can utilize the insight gained from this study to examine how organization's operation and programming can make improvements to cater to the needs of their targeted demographic.

Keywords: Greek, CBFO, Culturally Based Fraternal Organizations, Fraternity, Sorority, Belonging, Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Business

Introduction

As minority groups within the United States continue to grow and enrollment of students from those marginalized communities increases, culturally based fraternity and sorority organizations (CBFOs) provide a sense of community, help preserve student retention rates of colleges and universities, provide opportunities for personal and professional development, and make positive contributions to their communities and larger society. However, CBFO membership experience is often overshadowed by their older, larger, counterparts in organizations like Interfraternity Council (IFC) and Panhellenic Association, which creates a sense of disconnectedness for CBFO members from the larger Greek community.

Despite the trend of CBFOs being utilized as retention tools for colleges and universities to recruit and retain students of color, CBFOs receive limited assistance, support, and recognition. There is a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the membership experience of CBFOs and the typical personal experiences of their members.

Literature Review

The College Greek system, otherwise known as fraternity and sorority life, has a long history in the United States. The first Greek-letter fraternity ever established in the United States became Phi Beta Kappa in 1776. This literary society celebrates and advocates for excellence in the liberal arts (Phi Beta Kappa Society, 2023). Greek-letter organizations spread during the early 1800's. During the latter 1800's after an adequate number of graduated alumni became successful enough to donate money and resources back to their organizations, these men's societies became what we know of as fraternities today (Appalachian State University, 2023).

As more women began to attend college during the same period of growth for men's societies, the first women's literary societies formed due to their exclusion from the men's

groups. The early sororities formed to be an outlet for women's empowerment, advocated for women's rights, and academic advancement (History IT, 2023).

Enrollment of black students at colleges and university across the nation during these times was limited, and black students were prohibited from joining these fraternities. As a result, black students would form their own study groups. These study groups for black students would come to be Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (2023), founded at Cornell University in 1906. The formation of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. as the first intercollegiate Black Greek-letter organization (BGLO) and then Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (2023), founded in 1908 as the first intercollegiate Black Greek-letter sorority, would pave the way for many other culturally based fraternity and sorority organizations (CBFOs) to follow.

Benefits of Greek Life

In its early days, Greek-letter literary societies aimed to help members pursue academic advancement. This benefit remains for members in the present as fraternities and sororities provide resources and opportunities to support members through college. Other benefits of Greek membership include "higher levels of leadership and engagement in educationally purposeful experiences, racial identity development gains, stronger sense of belonging, higher grade point averages, and selective cognitive development gains" (Harris III & Harper, 2014, p. 704). Additionally, the goals of many fraternities and sororities are to provide opportunities to build friendships, gain social support, and foster a sense of belonging (Kase, Riversa, & Hunt, 2016; Thao, 2019), which helps colleges and universities retain students until graduation (Harrel-Hallmark, Castles, & Sasso, 2022). Research also shows that Greek members are more involved during college than nonaffiliated students in "increased levels of volunteerism and civic

responsibility, and increased willingness to donate to charitable and/or religious causes” (Asel, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2015, p. 1).

Critiques of Greek Life

On the other hand, hazing remains a prominent and constant concern within fraternity and sorority life and the focus of various studies (Owen, Burke, & Vichesky, 2008; Beard, Mobley, Jr., & Lawrence, 2021; Rogers, Rogers, & Anderson, 2012; Feuer, 2020; Richardson, Rains, & Hall-Ortega, 2020; Véliz-Calderón & Allan, 2017; Drout & Corsoro, 2003). Social pressure on both men and women, but primarily women, within fraternities and sororities have resulted in issues of body objectification (Basow, Foran, & Bookwala, 2007; Kase, Riversa, & Hunt, 2016), drugs and alcohol abuse (Asel, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2015; Maples et al, 2019), sexual violence and misconduct (Maples et al, 2019; Ortiz & Thompson, 2017), and academic misconduct (Asel, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2015).

Problematic History

Despite its admirable goals, fraternity and sorority life has had a long history of exclusion, sexism, racism, and classism. Fraternities were the first to form and sororities formed as a result of the exclusion from fraternities. However, only wealthy white women were able to afford a college education in those days, so the sororities that formed were made up of that demographic (History IT, 2023). These fraternities and sororities would come to form the Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic Association, governing bodies to represent the multiple fraternities and sororities in colleges and universities throughout the nation. Formerly, many IFC and Panhellenic organizations had policies and bylaws that blatantly prohibited membership for black students and other students of color (Beard, Mobley, Jr., & Lawrence, 2021). While many organizations have changed such outdated values and sentiments and increase diversity, the

population of IFC and Panhellenic continues to be predominantly white and social and economic barriers still stands for membership, making it a space where various students may struggle to afford and belong.

Culturally Based Greek Organizations

In response to systemic and campus-based forms of racial/ethnic discrimination, many culturally based fraternity and sorority organizations (CBFOs) were later founded following the examples from the first Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) (Garcia et al, 2022).

According to Thao (2019), “Culturally based student organizations help students gain cultural familiarity with others; serve as conduits for cultural expression and advocacy; and validate students' lived experiences on campus” (p. 28).

Often, students of color are the first in their family to attend college, which adds onto the stresses and challenges that typical college students already face (Harrel-Hallmark, Castles, & Sasso, 2022). Lee and Liu (2001) explain that intergenerational conflict begins during adolescence when children start to develop personal identities, values, autonomy, and independence. For students of color, this period of intergenerational conflict over autonomy and independence may be more delayed than their white peers and start closer to or after entering college, when they are farther away or more frequently away for the first time. CBFOs allow students of color, specially at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), a sense of being understood, safety with other students through racial sameness, and a break from pressures to education white peers and justify their cultural norms and experiences (Pulliam et al 2019; Zanolini Morrison, 2010). Membership within CBFO also provides the space and opportunity for members to discover and develop their racial and ethnic identities (Atkinson, Dean, & Espino, 2010).

Current Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the membership experience within culturally based fraternal organizations (CBFOs) and how childhood experiences revolving about culture and upbringing relates to the membership experience. “CBFO” will also be referred interchangeably as culturally based Greek-letter organizations within this research. Information from this study will be useful for national leadership of CBFOs to understand the needs, motivations, and values of existing members and potential new members and to examine how their organization’s operation and programming meets or fails to meet the needs and expectations of their membership. Organizations can also reflect on how the membership experience affects the potential development of their members and the larger impact within their communities.

Positionality

Before I present the methodology of this study, I present my affiliation as a sister of alpha Kappa Delta Phi International Sorority, Inc. I crossed into my sorority in the Fall of 2014 at the University of Oklahoma, a predominantly white institution, where members of the Greek community make up more than 30% of the student body. I formerly worked within a Greek life office, where I advised student leaders from various Greek councils and chapters. My interest on the topic of this study was sparked during a conversation the Greek life office had related to hazing prevention.

At the time, I had brought up the concern that current hazing awareness education, which was centered on hazing examples from Panhellenic and IFC chapters, may have minimal impact on students in culturally based fraternities and sororities due to the types of culture or upbringing they grew up with. I suggested that the type of upbringing they had or the culture they were

familiar with may result in normalization of certain behaviors or characteristics that makes them tolerant and unable to recognize those behaviors and characteristics as hazing, regardless of whether the individual is the victim or perpetrator.

My comments were met with silence from my coworkers of Panhellenic background. My coworker, who was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., chimed in to expand on my theory by relating it with examples from her personal experiences. That conversation reminded me of the handful of casual conversations I had had with other members of CBFOs about the parallels between our childhood and Greek membership experience. In my perspective at the time, this theory was almost common sense because I was a member of a CBFO with personal experiences from my culture.

However, sharing my perspective aloud to non-CBFO members allowed me to realize the lack of awareness and understanding that people outside of CBFOs know of the membership experience within CBFOs, which inspired me to seek out other members of CBFOs in an academic setting to learn and share their stories to spread awareness and understanding of the CBFO experience.

Methods

In order to understand the experiences of members within CBFOs and how their childhood upbringing may have related to their membership experience, a phenomenological approach was used within this study. The phenomenological approach uses a broader and open structure to allow participants the opportunity to freely disclose and share details of their experience, providing a richer sense of understanding and insights of people's lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Makunika, n.d.; Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, this study is shaped around a transcendental phenomenology approach. The goal behind this method of

qualitative study is not to explain lived experiences, but rather understand experiences and the meanings created from individuals who went through those lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Makunika (n.d.), a transcendental phenomenological approach requires “identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomena” (p.3). Bracketing refers to identifying personal beliefs and opinions regarding the phenomena being studied to be aware and mindful of one’s own feelings, perspectives, and potential biases that may affect the study, and then separating those personal notions when conducting the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Makunika, n.d.). Data collected from the study is then analyzed to find quotes or significant statements to identify themes related to the phenomena (Makunika, n.d.).

Recruitment and data collection for this study took place within a 7-week period starting from January 25, 2023, when the study was approved to March 15, 2023, when participant signups closed, to allow time for data analysis.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study utilized purposeful criterion sampling to recruit participants. Criterion sampling sets specific requirements that individuals must meet to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling allows researchers to study individuals who are guaranteed to have experienced the phenomenon being examined, so they are better able to provide rich and deep insights on the phenomenon being studied.

To qualify for participation in this study, individuals had to be 18+ years of age and hold membership in a CBFO. An additional criterion was that participants were members of their CBFO at predominantly white institution (PWI) to account for the differences in experience at

PWI's versus institutions with higher populations of people of color, such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) or Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI).

Multiple umbrella organizations of culturally based fraternities and sororities were contacted to request participant sign ups and assistance recruiting participants among members of their organizations that met the criteria. These umbrella organizations included National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), National APIDA Panhellenic Association (NAPA), and National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). Contact with the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC) was attempted but was unsuccessful due to missing contact information and a method of communication.

Requests for participation and assistance recruiting participants were sent to several national CBFOs: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Chi Sigma Tau National Fraternity, Inc., Delta Xi Nu Multicultural Sorority, Inc., Delta Xi Phi Multicultural Sorority, Inc., Gamma Beta Chi Fraternity, Inc., Gamma Eta Sorority, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Kappa Delta Chi Sorority, Inc., Kappa Phi Gamma Sorority, Inc., Lambda Phi Epsilon International Fraternity, Inc., Lambda Tau Omega Sorority, Inc., Omega Phi Chi Multicultural Sorority, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Phi Sigma Chi Multicultural Fraternity, Inc., Psi Sigma Phi Multicultural Fraternity, Inc., Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., Sigma Sigma Rho Sorority, Inc., and Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority, Inc. The national organizations contacted were listed on CBFO umbrella organizations' websites: NALFO, NAPA, NMGC, and NPHC. Other organizations were listed on those websites but could not be contacted due to missing contact information and/or method of communication or other technical obstacles. An exception was alpha Kappa Delta Phi Sorority, Inc., who were not contacted to request participation or assistance recruiting participants as to avoid creating conflict of interest for the

primary researcher or any potential sense of pressure on collegiate members of the organization to participate due to the primary researcher's personal affiliation and role in an international leadership position within the organization. Members of the organization were welcome to sign up for participation through their own discretion but were not requested or required by the organization's international leadership to participate.

A few fraternity and sorority Greek life offices and Greek councils from different PWI's were contacted: Oklahoma State University, Oregon State University, Stanford University, University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Mississippi, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, University of Oklahoma, University of Oregon, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, University of Texas at Dallas, University of Washington, and University of Wisconsin-Madison. College and university fraternity and sorority offices and Greek councils were selected at random by geographical regions with hopes to diversify the participant recruitment pool.

Furthermore, a study recruitment flyer was posted on social media repeatedly throughout the 7-week period with a brief description of the study, participant criteria, instructions on how to sign up, and a link to schedule an interview and contact the research. In soliciting for research participation, transparency was provided that the primary researcher is a member of an Asian-interest sorority prior to any participant sign-ups and interviews conducted.

Data Collection

All interviews were held through Zoom, a videoconference software (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2023). Individuals signed up to participate in the study by scheduling virtual Zoom interviews through Calendly (2023), a scheduling platform. The Calendly link was provided in the research recruitment emails and flyer, and the Calendly scheduling software

automatically generated individual Zoom meeting links for each participant signup. Interviews lasted approximately 26 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes. The average interview time was approximately 50 minutes once participants were read and reviewed the *Consent to Participate in Research* form (see Appendix C) provided by the University of Oklahoma. After receiving verbal confirmation of consent from participants to take part in the study and be recorded, interviews started with background questions to get a baseline understanding of participants' perspectives. Background questions (see Appendix A) asked for age, race, ethnicity, where they grew up, how long they have lived in the United States if they were foreign born, what college(s) or university/universities have they attended, if they are current or graduated students, what CBFO they are a member of, and their current membership status with the organization.

Following background questions, semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B) related to childhood upbringing, culture, and membership experience within CBFO were asked. All interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed through Zoom's closed-captioning feature. The primary researcher reviewed all interview transcripts to correct automated closed-captioning errors prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through three different methods. One method utilized NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (Lumivero, 2023). Transcripts from each interview were uploaded onto NVivo and auto coded with the built-in software feature to find themes amongst the generated codes from the data.

The primary researcher reviewed each interview transcript one-by-one to identify significant statements made by participants individually. After reviewing data from each participant, the primary researcher compared the data between participants to find similar or

repeated themes from their significant statements. A second researcher assisted with the data analysis by independently reviewing all participant interviews and identifying significant statements and themes from each interview.

The significant statements and themes that each researcher identified independently were then compared for consistency. While the primary researcher has personal Greek affiliation, the second researcher does not, which provided a fresh perspective in analyzing the data and determining themes. Due to limited experience with NVivo, this method was not used at the primary data analysis method. The codes generated from NVivo were reviewed and used as a supplementary resource to the two researchers' independent data analysis.

Participants

There were five participants in total: one fraternity member and four sorority members. Provided are some insights into each participants' background to gain a better understanding of their perspectives.

Participant #1 (P1). P1 is a 24-year-old, Vietnamese-American that was born and raised in the Midwest of the United States. He is an alumni of an Asian-interest fraternity from a college in the Midwest.

Participant #2 (P2). P2 is a 22-year-old, Filipino-American that was born and raised on the East Coast of the United States. She is an alumna of an Asian-interest sorority from a college on the East Coast.

Participant #3 (P3). P3 is a 22-year-old, international student that has resided in the United States for five years. She identifies as Southeast Asian, specifically Indonesian. P3 is a collegiate member of an Asian-interest sorority from a college in the Midwest of the United States.

Participant #4 (P4) P4 is a 28-year-old, immigrant from Korea, and has lived in the United States for 12 years. She is an alumna of an Asian-interest sorority from a college in the Midwest.

Participant #5 (P5). P5 is a 22-year-old, Filipino-American. She was born and raised in the Philippines and is now a naturalized American citizen who has lived in the United States for seven years. She is a collegiate member of an Asian-interest sorority.

Two out of the five participants were members of the same chapter at their college. All the other participants were from different chapters and attended different colleges from the other participants.

Results

In studying participant's membership experience in relation to their personal upbringing, two main themes connected all participants: belonging and business. The themes of belonging and business were ones that were most apparent in descriptions of their CBFO membership experience. For the purpose of this study, belonging refers to a sense of connectedness or compatibility within a space or group of people. Belonging may be represented in friendship, support, acceptance, and other positive qualities and experiences within a space or group of people. Business refers to professional conduct, activities, and operations. As the themes of this study are described, some direct quotes from participants were altered to remove specific identifiable information for the sake of participant's anonymity.

Belonging

The main goal for many fraternities and sororities is to provide a sense of belonging, family, and a "home away from home" for their members. When asked what had piqued their interest to join a culturally based Greek-letter organization (CBFO), all participants expressed

desire for friendship, connection, or belonging. Most importantly, they expressed a desire to connect with others who could understand and accept their racial and ethnic backgrounds.

P1, who had grown up in a predominantly affluent, white, high-income community described going through childhood and early adolescence emulating “whiteness.” He shared that it had taken him great effort and time to assimilate into the community. He wore what he called the stereotypical white attire consisting of Nike Elite socks, Sperry’s shoes, and Vineyard Vines apparel. He described himself “like any other white person at the high school. I just happen to have yellow skin.”

Outside of his geographical community, his family were members of a cultural religious community, where they attended and conducted religious practices with people who shared their ethnic background. He had found solace and comfort in that cultural religious community in contrast to the geographical community where he lived and attended school due to various cultural barriers. The sense of solace and comfort came from “being able to not have to really justify why I’m Asian.”

While he was in high school, he had received comments of disapproval from his best friend, who was white, when news had spread that his older sibling had joined an Asian-recreational group after starting college. They questioned why his sibling would specifically join an Asian group, not just a “regular” group. That experience resulted in him rejecting all forms of culture related to Asian-ness going into college. He stated:

I don’t wanna [sic] be seen as Asian, specifically. I really wanna [sic] be...flexible. I really wanna [sic] be fluid. I don’t want to be like my brother. I don’t want to get made fun of by my friends that are attending different universities that aren’t even here.

When invited to “rush” or go through recruitment for a CBFO, he had said that he would join IFC and pledge “Phi Delt before I become a [*CBFO member*] or whatever else.” As a result of that rejection of culture, he did not have any friends during his first semester and a half of college. He experienced loneliness and “wanted to make friends so desperately.” He had known some Asian friends from his religious culturally community who attended the same college, so at that point, he started to attend more cultural student organizations that people he knew were a part of. He grew accustomed to the people in those organizations and when his sophomore year came around, he decided to rush for a CBFO because his friends were rushing as well. P1 described “cultural comfort” that came from being a member of a CBFO:

You kind of surround yourself with people that looks like you, that can understand you, that you don’t have to really justify your cultural identity with all this baggage that you may have, in relation to your white peers or...any other peer that doesn’t come from the same specific identity, community, or ethnicity...it was very very [sic] easy for us to be in the same room together, did not feel like we were like the only Asian person in there...so I think that the reason why we would have so many people come to this organization...is because of that cultural comfort...knowing I don’t have to fucking explain to everyone in there why my parents are pissed off at me, and I can’t come to this party this weekend because everyone understands...like your parents are Asian, you don’t gotta [sic] explain, man. I get it.

In P2’s experience, she had originally attended a small, private college. She had shared that Greek life was a significant part of the college culture with Panhellenic and IFC, but she was not interested in Greek life until she saw her friends join Black Greek-letter organizations. In her perspective:

Something about the sisterhood was so like evident...it was almost like tangible in every time they were outside...in the plaza...when they were strolling and stepping, or just like hanging out. You could tell that these women or these men had connections with each other, and that was something that I really wanted, especially as an Asian American student.

P3's experience was unique compared to other participants in this study. She was the only international student and even recognized herself to be different from her peers as "a wild card" in terms of upbringing, experience, perspective, and nationality. P3's insights provided a fresh look into the membership experience of a CBFO member and various needs that national organizations should consider in their programming and operations to create a welcoming environment and sense of belonging. P3 played a role in establishing a new chapter of a CBFO on her campus, also known as chartering. Her motivation for chartering the organization was to create a new environment for people to find a sense of belonging. She described a constant sense of isolation and alienation from other organizations and members of other CBFOs on her college campus as an international student. She shared, "International students have a really hard time trying to find like their own kind of place...or a home essentially like here, because you're already apart from your actual home." She also brought up the issue of "clique-ness" amongst CBFO members, a topic P1 also mentioned.

In finding that sense of belong, some CBFO members can take their newly gained Greek membership to an extreme, overtaking their identity. Social identity refers to the self-perception individuals place onto themselves, in relation to other individuals, and classification of in-group members and out-group members is formed based on perceived identities (Hogg & Reid, 2006). P1 explained this social identity as "they kind of make that line jacket and their line name, the

strolling, the calls, whatever else their identity...they see [their organization] as the community and then other... people as just kind of like static noise or white noise in the peripheral.” In P3’s experience on her college campus, if an individual was not already affiliated with a Greek-letter organization, CBFO members would try to recruit them.

However, at the same time, P3 had realized “if you weren’t a CBFO or any sort of affiliation...you weren’t considered like important enough to talk to.” She elaborated by sharing an example of being in a cultural student organization. The students of Greek affiliation in this organization socialized exclusively with other students of Greek affiliation rather than meet new people and make new friends outside of the Greek social groups. In P3’s perspective, the other CBFO members had assumed that her experience, interests, and background were too different from theirs to try to relate or connect to. She said, “every time I try to initiate [conversation], it was just, it felt like I was talking to a wall.” The experience was strange to P3 as “this kind of culture [Greek] only exists in the United States. Nowhere else, like literally no other country has this kind of thing [Greek culture], at least from what I understand.”

P3 eventually found sisterhood and belonging through friendships she had created by venturing out and attending cultural campus events by herself. Through this sense of belonging that she had gained from her group of friends, the group was inspired to establish a new space and new organization that would feel inclusive and welcoming to all people. Once news got out that her group of friends were trying to charter a CBFO, the group gained acceptance from other members of existing CBFOs that wanted to network with them.

In P4’s experience of desiring to belong, she explained that she had previously attended a diverse community college that was predominantly made up of minority groups. However, the community college lacked the presence of Korean people. In high school, P4 had wanted to join

Korean organizations, but the Korean organizations in her community at the time were comprised of freshly immigrated Koreans, whereas she had become more westernized after immigrating to the United States around age 16. She had felt that she did not fit the demographic, and the social and cultural differences were too large for her to fit in. Due to the lack of Korean presence in her community college, she described “starving for that Korean, or even Asian cultural experience just to relate to so many other members.” She explained “that’s why I thought, okay [*CBFO organization*] hits all those boxes, like being a part of a sorority, Greek organization, being a part of my people, just getting that sense of family that I really needed right away from home.”

P5 is also an individual that chartered a CBFO on her college campus. She had made friends with people on campus and gained a sense of sisterhood. She was interested in a sisterhood that would support her to thrive in college and provide her with the resources and benefits to be academically successful while having a good social experience. When asked why she had not been interested in joining a Panhellenic sorority, she felt that she would not match the Panhellenic community due to it being centered around whiteness. She explained that being a part of a Panhellenic sorority would have put more hindrances in front of her and would have made her feel uncomfortable considering the complexities of cultures she identifies with.

Business

Another theme that appeared amongst the participants within their Greek membership was business. This theme came up in positive, negative, and neutral experiences that participants disclosed in their interviews regarding how their Greek membership played out.

P1 described his CBFO, an Asian-interest fraternity, as “we don’t traditionally fit the mode of a white fraternity or white sorority. We don’t have a house. We don’t have a big

membership. We cater towards a very specific, niche population of folks within a very small demographic to begin with, so our organization at any time, the active house membership was like maybe 25 maximum.”

Through P1’s CBFO membership experience, he stated “we weren’t like super business all the time...we did our business well, but we were also just like a bunch of...Kevin Nguyen’s...we just like to hang out at stuff.” At the same time, his organization was also motivated to improve themselves and leave a positive legacy. He shared “we pride ourselves in kind of wanting to be the best.” Despite being a smaller organization with limited resources in comparison to larger IFC fraternities with decades of alumni and fundraising, P1’s organization upheld competitiveness internally and externally. He discussed how they pushed their limits to be the best fraternity on campus “in terms of how much we can be conducive and productive to the greater community, the community that we lived in, so a lot of our organization’s events were catered towards that.” It was also important to them to be the best active member they could be and have an impressive history of contributions within the organization to qualify for executive leadership positions within the organization.

P1 explained the social prestige in holding membership status within a CBFO and that may be a reason many people join. They might have had lower social prestige in high school or prior to coming to college, so they use the opportunity of being in Greek life to “redefine themselves, start off fresh...join something that will – in their eyes – push their prestige up even more.” In P1’s perspective, the potential increase in social prestige motivated members to conduct CBFO business well through their operations and programming. The strive for social prestige also contributes to CBFO members making their membership identity their primary

identity as mentioned previously in P1's description of CBFO members seeing nonaffiliated members as white noise within their Greek experience.

While P1's membership experience while conducting business was viewed in a more positive lens, other participants within the study, such as P2 and P4, had negative experiences when business became a priority over sense of belonging and siblinghood. Both P2 and P4 shared that their membership experiences within CBFO did not turn out the way they had expected them to be.

P2, a member of an Asian-interest sorority expressed:

I was hoping for like kind of a family...sisterhood where it's like you feel comfortable with each other...I feel like we were just in survival mode a lot of time like trying to host this fundraiser or meet this event or meet this requirement for national board...so I don't think that sisterhood was really a priority.

P2 further elaborated, "we all cared about our pillars, but I don't think that we agreed on how to meet our pillars, so it made working together really hard... there's a lot of pettiness." A lack of effective conflict management and problem solving in conducting sorority business had negatively affected P2's membership experience. In her opinion, "that comes with being in, and it's not just Greek life, just any undergraduate organizations where college students don't really know how to express their feelings or work through conflict."

P2's membership experience overlapped with sentiments regarding the cultural experiences of Asian American in that "Asian American women, you kind of have to work hard in order for people to notice you. And then sometimes, even if you do work really hard, they don't notice you still." She had felt that other members within her organization were "holding people to unrealistic standards of approaching problems in a way that may be not really

conducive.” In her membership experience, she had felt pressure for excellence and “pressure to carry yourself in a certain way.” In interacting with other members of her chapter, she said:

They would say that, you know, we have to be bitches, or else no one is gonna [sic] listen to us. And I just thought it was so bizarre because... If people treat us like this in the real world, and we have to deal with that, then why are we doing it to each other in a space that's meant to be safe for us?

Another issue that caused strife within her membership experience was the power dynamic and system of hierarchy as a result of deference to elders. She explained:

That's...a big part of Asian Greek life...I think a lot of the time that was kind of use or, I guess, abused to silence younger members or more recently joined members... You can't like say these things because you're younger or you don't know what you're talking about because you're younger... They mean like I haven't been in the organization long enough... I just saw more, I guess, feelings of resentment between the new members and the older people, so I think that's a dynamic in Asian culture that was kind of replicated or carried over into the Greek experience.

An additional similarity in P2's membership experience and her cultural background was the communication styles of other members within her sorority. She stated:

I think that culture affects how we communicate with other people... It's not that Asian people are passive. I think that Asians in general tend to communicate in a way that is indirect, and sometimes it's wise, and then sometimes it devolves into like this gossipy he-says-she-says kind of thing or just straight up avoidance. So, I think the way that my sisters communicated with one another was kind of a result of culture in some ways.

Despite her negative experiences within her chapter, P2 had gained a more positive experience after graduating and met sorority members outside of her chapter. She was hopeful for the improvement of the Greek membership experience and related it to experiences of the larger Asian American community:

I think that we've been working towards undoing this kind of generational trauma...I remember growing up, I would be so mad at my parents for things that they did, and I still get mad at them for the things that they do. I'm like, why are you doing it like this? And the more that they open up to me about how they grew up, the more I realized that they really are trying to be better parents than their parents were. And it's like happening generation to generation...I think that's also what's happening in terms of Asian organizations, like the younger people are learning from the mistakes of the older ones who are guiding them so that they can make the organization a better space for the members who are coming in the future.

P1 touched on similar insights regarding the larger Asian American community in correlation to culturally based Greek life, particularly Asian Greek life. P1 had stated "one of the biggest criticisms of Greek life in general, but especially Asian Greek life, and especially Asian fraternity Greek life is maleness, male toxicity, male masculinity...fragile masculinity..." which had shown up in how fraternity and sorority operations, relationships, and membership experience played out in previous decades due to the sorts of normalized behavior, discussions, and sentiments that were around in society and the larger Asian American communities that consisted of older generations. The membership experienced from P1's perspective had shifted operations and conversations from "just the act of being Asian and practicing Asian traditions and norms to what does it actually mean to be Asian American and how can that be promoted

within the community”. Discussions like how to increase Asian American voters turnout, navigating increase in Asian hate crimes, how to be better allies towards Black and Brown communities, and recognizing disenfranchisement of Asians and racism against Asians have occurred more commonly within the newer generations of Asian Greek life and the larger Asian American community, despite the model minority persona, which refers to the stereotype that Asian Americans are more successful academically, financially, socially, and professionally than other minority groups (Museus & Kiang, 2009).

Another participant whose membership experience had not met her expectations was P4, a member of an Asian-interest sorority. When asked about her general overall membership experience, P4 stated:

I would tell my younger self, like the younger me that joined during that time like, hey. Don't work too hard on this. It's not life or death, but obviously the people around you are making it like it is or making it feel like it's life or death to you. Or maybe it's yourself that you're just putting too much pressure on yourself that you have to do the best that you can, which you know stems from like values...that was told by my mom so obviously, there's a connection there.

P4 used this description in discussing deadlines members must meet, expectations to uphold, and requirements to fulfil. She also shared that there was a disconnect of shared values and goals between her and her CBFO chapter that made her membership experience unfulfilling and did not provide a sense of family as she had hoped for. When she held an executive position and worked with other leaders within the chapter's executive board, P4 encouraged other executive leaders to speak up and share their opinions. She recalled “almost forcing them to speak out on their opinions too, but of course, that made them uncomfortable...That is something

that I wasn't understanding of. Logically, it did not click for me why people would not want to voice their opinions." Her reflection during our conversation highlighted an important perspective in the culturally based Greek membership experience:

Now, I realize that, you know, organizations like student government association are filled with people who want to... who are there for a reason like to speak out against certain things or speak on certain things. [CBFO organization] – the value and goals are not that. The initial goal is to just find a family and find people who you will belong with, so obviously talking is not a required thing that you need to do, right?

This reflection from P4 may resonate with other Greek members and organizations as a common problem. The initial goal of the organization is to provide a sense of belonging, while other pillars, mission, or goals add onto that original idea and may create more requirements or more work than some people may be prepared for. Individuals join organizations seeking different outcomes, but when the goals and outcomes of an organization's members are not compatible with one another, discord starts to form, resulting in negative experiences for various members. Some members may join simply to make connections, while others join to advance specific causes or exercise particular skills.

P4 referred to instances when people are forced into leadership roles due to limited candidates within the organization, but those people are not fit or unwilling to lead because it was not a responsibility or goal they wanted:

Sometimes like smaller chapters like mine don't have any choice but to put those unspoken or like soft spoken people up on a pedestal, so I think that's why the disconnect or the discord happens, right, because there's no choice for them but to be in those leadership positions.

Moving to a different thought process, P3 and P5's perspectives regarding conducting business within the CBFO experience was that it was stressful but necessity. P3, a member of an Asian-interest sorority, experienced alienation prior to chartering her own CBFO. She gained acceptance from existing members of existing CBFOs after she worked to charter a CBFO. P3 understood the experience as "they wanted to try to talk to you more, but I also knew partly was because like that networking background is needed because that's kind of like what keeps these kinds of organizations like going at the same time." In making sense of the situation, she acknowledged that an emphasis is placed on business within CBFOs despite the organizations being social spaces that foster friendships, belonging, and siblinghood. Through her experience establishing a new CBFO and working to build the foundation, she operated strategically with a business mindset so that the organization can become an inclusive and positive space for future members. Through the sisterhood she formed with other members of her organization, she gained a sense of relief that she no longer had to experience loneliness and isolation. This sentiment was shared with other members of her organization, which motivated them to balance business with sisterhood.

P5, a charter for an Asian-interest sorority, expressed similarities to P3 and shared that her membership experience was fulfilling yet stressful. She described it as:

It's running a business at the same time as sustaining a sisterhood... So, the business part of it – I feel like any starting business, because we did just start, the chapter would have a lot of stresses that come with it, because it's, you know, almost from the ground up as a new organization. And fulfilling because of the lessons that I learn, the values within business and personal, and the people that I meet, the opportunities we might have created for people.

Discussion

Although this study was designed to gain insights from members of various culturally based Greek-letter organizations of different backgrounds, racial groups, and ethnicities, the participants turned out to all be members of Asian Greek-letter organizations (AGLO). Despite the homogenous racial group that appeared in the study, the ethnic differences between the participants showed similarities and contrasts amongst their membership experience and childhood upbringing. The themes of belonging and business were apparent amongst the participants, but individual differences had made it challenging to identify additional themes that applied to all participants.

A majority of the participants mentioned having higher standards and expectations placed upon them by family members during their upbringing and childhood, but the level of standards and strictness of expectations varied. Some factors that affected those levels included include parent-child relationships, immigration history, environmental influences, and personal adversity. The subject of cultural experience amongst the participants was complex to examine and categorize into a singular theme due to multiple factors, in addition to the fact that the Asian American community is comprised of many different ethnic groups and various intersectionality that affect individual experiences. Even for participants who shared ethnic identity, such as P2 and P5, their experiences varied due to P1 being born in America and growing up on the East Coast versus P5 being born abroad, coming to the United States during early adolescence, and living in the Midwest. Aside from cultural identity, cultural upbringing and background did not present as much significance to the participants or within their membership experiences as one would expect for members of culturally based organizations.

Listening to each participant's story, witnessing their reflection, and how they understood their experiences helped me reflect on my own membership experience and change my perspective as a member of an Asian-interest sorority but also as a member of the larger racial community that I am a part of. The experience of conducting this research was a valuable and positive time for me and I have so much gratitude towards the participants for trusting me to share their stories.

Implications for Future Research

The insight gained from participants within this study was refreshing and enlightening. However, some improvements that can be made to this study is having more participants, different CBFO communities and organizations represented, participants from more varied geographical locations, and more varied ages represented, in addition to a better mix of fraternity members and sorority members. To help recruit more diverse participants, a recommendation would be to create a research team or recruitment team consisting of various CBFO membership. This will help break that initiate barrier of ingroup versus outgroup member.

A surprising perspective gained from this study was the perspective of an international student. Although culturally based Greek-letter organizations make up a small sub-group within the larger Greek community, international students as members making up an even smaller sub-group. The perspective and insights from P3 were extremely unique in comparison to other participants, which resulted in her being an outlier for this study. However, international students face even less support for transitioning and acclimating into college than other students from marginalized communities seeking belonging and support through their college experience. More research done on the experiences of international students in general and within the Greek community may provide information and suggestions on how colleges and universities can help

international students transition into their new host country and get access to resources for professional, academic, and social success. Unique perspectives from international students who already feel like outsiders on campus and in new environments can help Greek organizations make improvements to foster welcoming and inclusive spaces for individuals from all sorts of different backgrounds, such as out-of-state students and nontraditional students.

Additionally, a large discrepancy exists amongst CBFOs. Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs), which consists of the Divine-9, also known as National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), is the oldest sub-community of CBFO. Many of the organizations of BGLOs established in the early 1900's and their existence paved the way for later groups of CBFOs. An example is Asian Greek-letter organizations (AGLOs), many of whom were founded during the latter half of the 1900's. Many AGLO's traditions, culture, and structure were modeled off BGLOs. From my personal experience as times are changing and organizations and membership start having more critical conversations around various social issues, such as appropriation of BGLO and Black culture, it seems like various AGLO's are now re-evaluating and perhaps redefining their identity and culture. Studies on CBFOs related to social and political changes would be interesting to examine if and how membership experiences and organizational operations and programming are affected.

Furthermore, as college enrollment for students of color increase, studies completed on more CBFO would be beneficial to examine if and how CBFOs are meeting and supporting the needs of new generations of students of color entering colleges and universities following global changes like COVID-19. The subject of CBFO is a limited focus that there leaves much information to gain from studying this community that is comprised of multiple sub-groups.

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Appendix A: Background Introduction Questions

Age:

What race & ethnicity do you identify with:

Where did you grow up?

(If foreign-born, how long have you lived in the United States?)

College/University attended:

Have you graduated?/What year did you graduate?

What organization are you a member of:

Are you currently active? Undergraduate or alumni?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions: These are some questions participants may be asked during the interviews in no particular order. Follow-up questions may be asked for clarification or elaboration depending on participants' responses.

How would you describe your childhood upbringing and what role does culture play into that?

What levels of education does your family have?

Can you explain to me a little bit on social culture or social makeup of your college/university?

What piqued your interest to join a CBFO versus a non-CBFO?

What was your membership experience like?

What role does culture play within a CBFO?

What are some similarities between the values, expectations, or traditions of your cultural background and your membership experience within an CBFO?

What are some differences between the values, expectations, or traditions of your cultural background and your membership experience within a CBFO?

Appendix C: Condensed Oral Consent to Participate Form

Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research about the effects of upbringing on the membership experience within culturally based fraternity and sorority organizations.

If you agree to participate, you will be contacted for an interview that may last up to 1 hour or more depending on how much you would like to discuss. Interviews will be conducted through Zoom, and each interview will be audio and video recorded. Your audio, video, or photographic images may be used in University research reports unless you tell me not to do this.

You may experience these risks by participating in this research: emotional distress or discomfort.

Questions that could be emotionally distressing: We will ask you to answer questions that may make you distressed or trigger strong emotional reactions. If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to provide an answer, or you can stop our discussion or discontinue participation in the research. If the researcher sees signs that you are distressed, they will pause the discussion and ask if you would like to continue. There are also resources for you that are available anytime: Talkspace is a digital mental health service that connects members to thousands of dedicated providers from a secure, HIPAA-compliant platform. You can learn more about Talkspace at <https://www.talkspace.com/online-therapy/>

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

Collection of demographic or geographic location data that could lead to deductive re-identification: You will be asked to provide demographic information that describes you. We may also gather information about your geographic location in this research. Different combinations of personal and geographic information may make it possible for your identity to be guessed by someone who was given, or gained access, to our research records. To minimize the risk of deductive re-identification, we will not combine identifying variables, nor analyze and report results for small groups of people with specific demographic characteristics.

There are no benefits for participating in this research.

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be confidential within the research team.

We will not share your data or use it in future research.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you consent to audio recording? Yes No

Do you consent to video recording? Yes No

Your photographs and audio or video records may be used in University research reports unless you tell me not to do this.

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? Yes No

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Thuy Bui at thuydnbui@ou.edu and Faculty Advisor: Dr. Shannon Bert at bert@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? Yes No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed?

_____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____