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MANAGING SISTERHOOD AND SELF: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND COMMUNICATION OF LGBTQ+ PANHELLENIC SORORITY MEMBERS

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MANAGING SISTERHOOD AND SELF: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND COMMUNICATION OF LGBTQ+ PANHELLENIC SORORITY MEMBERS

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Abstract

Throughout history and into the present, LGBTQ+ individuals have been a part of Panhellenic sororities. Previous research has identified the presence of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and explored some of their unique experiences in their sororities. The current study extends previous research by using a communication lens to investigate the aspects of identity that shape LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other Panhellenic sorority members and the communication strategies they utilize to manage their multiple intersectional identities. Specifically, interview data from 17 LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members across the United States were analyzed using social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) as a guiding framework. Findings revealed that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other members is shaped by their individual social identities, the social identities of their sororities, and the structural forces within Panhellenic sororities. Additionally, the results indicated that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members used communication to fit in with group norms, resist group norms, manage out-group perceptions of Panhellenic sororities, and develop connections with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Panhellenic sorority, social identities, communication, intersectionality

Managing Sisterhood and Self: Investigating the Social Identities and Communication of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

Since the 1850s, sororities have been a part of many college campuses (Campbell, 2012). Although many assume they understand sororities and sorority members, there are widespread and commonly believed misassumptions about them, such as the idea that all sorority members are cisgender and heterosexual (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001). Despite this misconception, individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other gender and sexual minorities (LGBTQ+) have long been a part of sororities and have their own unique lived experiences and ways of communicating their identity within sororities (Evans, 2023; Littlefield, 2016; Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001).

It is important to challenge such assumptions that all sorority members are cisgender and heterosexual because these misguided beliefs erase the complexity of LGBTQ+ sorority members' multiple and intersecting social identities, which impede authentic understanding of these individuals, their relationships, their social identities, and the ways in which they communicate. With increased visibility comes the opportunity to have necessary conversations about how identity and the regulation of identity impact communication and social identities for LGBTQ+ sorority members and others. Additionally, by studying LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, we can not only question false generalizations but also contribute to what is known about the relationship between communication and social identities, and how these individuals rely on communication to manage their multiple intersectional identities as LGBTQ+ people and Panhellenic sorority members (Evans, 2023).

Therefore, the current study sought to explore the interconnection of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' intersectional identities and their communication. To accomplish

this goal, I interviewed 17 Panhellenic sorority members from across the United States and analyzed their responses utilizing social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through conducting semi-structured interviews, I was able to deeply engage with participants to learn more about their experiences, communication, and identities to understand what aspects of identity informed their communication and what communication strategies they used to manage their multiple, intersectional social identities. By doing this study, I aimed to accomplish the goals of increasing visibility and understanding of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and the complexity of social identities and communication.

Literature Review

Panhellenic Sororities as a Site of Analysis

History of Panhellenic Sororities

Historically, higher education institutions started as a place of learning exclusively for socially and financially privileged white men (Bielaska, 2023). In 1776, Greek life started at the College of William and Mary with the inception of Phi Beta Kappa Society, a private society for men looking to develop themselves socially and academically (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012). It was not until 1851 that the first sorority for women, the Adelphean Society (now known as Alpha Delta Pi), was started at the Wesleyan Female College (Campbell, 2012).

At the time, the purpose of sororities was similar to that of fraternities, but in addition to providing a setting for social and academic development, they were a place for members to be groomed into proper women ready to marry socially elite men and keep the women away from unfavorable suitors (Scott, J. F., 1965). Their social group came with identity regulation as they

were expected to enact cisheteronormative[1] and patriarchal presentations of self and relationships (Scott, J. F., 1965). Specifically, sorority women were expected to be white, Christian, educated, heterosexual, hegemonically feminine (stemming from the idea of *hegemonic femininity*, where femininity is defined based on traditional binary gender roles in a way that bolsters whiteness and masculine hierarchy over women; Schippers, 2007), and from a high social class (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Campbell, 2012; Scott, J. F., 1965). Sororities became a setting for women to be molded to fit the desires of previous generations, as alumnae set the rules and standards for younger members (Scott, J. F., 1965). The level of regulation and socialization from older generations mimicked the hierarchy and control of traditional family units, where older individuals molded and guided younger members on how to behave and present themselves (Earley, 1998; Campbell, 2012**;** Scott, J. F., 1965). Through this process of regulation, narratives about how women should behave, look, and marry infested the social group and informed the expected presentation of social identity.

These sorority groups were exclusive and elusive as they came with secret ritualistic behavior, such as handshakes, recruitment practices for new members, and meetings, and they were self-governed, eradicating the need for outside involvement (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Scott, J. F., 1965). In the 1890s, sororities started creating chapter houses and expected members to move in, and the need for members to be financially well off to afford membership dues and house payments increased, as did the separation between members and non-members (Campbell, 2012). The privatization and social categorization of sororities solidified differentiation between in-group members and out-group members.

[1] Cisheteronormative is a concept combining cisnormativity and heteronormativity where identities within the male and female gender and sex binary and heterosexual identities are seen as normative (Bartels et al., 2025).

As the number of sororities grew, so did the need for structure and regulation, leading to the development of the Intersorority Conference, now known as the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), in 1902 with the goal of improving the lives of women educationally, professionally, and personally (National Panhellenic Conference, 2017). The NPC started as an exclusionary organization that had strict requirements for members that often only allowed cisheteronormative, traditionally feminine, upper-class, and white women (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998). As time went on, more diverse individuals emerged on college campuses, but Panhellenic sororities still held on to discriminatory beliefs that limited membership for students of non-dominant identities, especially students of color (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998). Even when women of color were allowed to join Panhellenic sororities, the inclusion of diverse individuals was not without strife, which led to the development of culturally based sororities outside of the NPC for individuals who were Black, Jewish, Latina, and GLB (gay, lesbian, and bisexual; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Campbell, 2012; Case et al., 2005). With the direct and indirect segregation of students based on their identities, norms for in-group members' social identities continued to perpetuate the prioritization of dominant identities, making it difficult to foster diversity in sororities, especially Panhellenic sororities.

Current Reality of Panhellenic Sororities

Currently, the NPC consists of 26 sororities with chapters (i.e., branches that exist at different universities) all over the country, with the main goal of fostering meaningful communities and opportunities for growth for women (National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.a; National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.b). Unfortunately, while the NPC has made strides to grow from their past by implementing modern policies that disavow the exclusion of members based

on race, religion, sexual orientation, etc., their discriminatory practices and norms have persisted and contributed to the maintenance of power structures, although more discretely (Garcia, 2019). This continuation of discriminatory practices and norms is especially prominent is especially true at predominantly white institutions (PWI; Barber et al., 2024). Greek organizations at PWI have been found to commonly align themselves less with liberalism and feminism and more with ethnocentrism and authoritarianism, compared to those not in Greek life, and some have participated in racist and sexist activities, such as hosting parties where members adorn themselves in blackface and make fun of slavery (Campbell, 2012; Garcia, 2019; Worthen, 2014). These social groups create micro-societies that perpetuate conservative social norms seen in society at large, such as cisheteronormativity, sexism, racism, and more, impeding social change even as diversity on college campuses increases (Bielaska, 2023; Sasso, 2018).

Within these societies of Greek life, there is commonly an unofficial social hierarchy of sororities, where ranking is based on multiple factors, such as heterosexual attractiveness, levels of promiscuity, and class, and is assigned predominantly by fraternity members, although sorority members can also contribute to the assignment of ranking (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). Sororities that are considered top tier in ranking are those seen as the most attractive by fraternity members and perceived to have lower levels of promiscuity, while bottom tier sororities are perceived to be less attractive, more diverse (e.g., in terms of weight and race), and more promiscuous, and middle tier houses are somewhere in between for those various factors (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). Higher rankings come with higher levels of social power, which further privileges those with dominant identities (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020). However, not all Panhellenic sororities have these informal ranking systems, as commonly seen on college campuses with smaller Greek life communities (Scott, J. B., 2018).

This caveat is not the only one that exists. While Panhellenic sororities do still have struggles with discriminatory norms, there are some that have been more successful in being able to authentically become more accepting as they have improved in terms of diversity and inclusivity (Evans, 2023). While immense amounts of research have focused on the negatives of Panhellenic sororities, there has also been scholarship that has identified the positives of group membership that align with the NPC's current goals of helping sorority members develop communities and grow as individuals (Evans, 2023; National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.b; Scott, J. B., 2018). These beneficial effects have also been seen with individuals with marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who have been able to have positive perceptions of their sorority experiences, form bonds with other members, and access leadership opportunities (Case et al., 2005; Evans, 2023; Littlefield, 2016). Yet, their sexuality can still be seen as diminishing these positive effects, as marginalization of LGBTQ+ members was not always able to be fully addressed due to structural issues that sustain oppression (Case et al., 2005; Evans, 2023; Littlefield, 2016). Overall, Panhellenic sororities and the experiences of Panhellenic sorority members are not all the same, and therefore, it is important to address both the positive and negative realities of Panhellenic sororities and their members' experiences.

Value of Analyzing Panhellenic Sororities

It is valuable to focus on Panhellenic sororities for multiple reasons. First, it is beneficial to look at sororities compared to fraternities because being an organization made for women compared to men comes with unique challenges of sexism and misogyny that inform members' experiences and communicative choices (Evans, 2023; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). Sorority members can often struggle with communicating about their sorority identity

with those outside of sororities due to common sexist and misogynistic stereotypes that they are vain, unintelligent, obsessed with boys, faking their bonds with one another, and more (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. B., 2018). Panhellenic sororities have specifically been chosen for the focus of this study because the NPC pioneered the national organization of sororities following the creation of the first sorority for women, Alpha Delta Pi, which is a part of the NPC (Campbell, 2012; National Panhellenic Conference, 2017). Additionally, the NPC's exclusionary roots have led to its controversial present, where many Panhellenic sororities have been shown to perpetuate cisheteronormativity, sexism, racism, and more through their widespread exclusionary group norms that impact the ways members can communicate as they try to fit in and have positive experiences (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Campbell, 2012; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019; Sasso, 2018). Despite these issues, Panhellenic sororities still attract different kinds of individuals who may or may not face issues with discrimination depending on their individual identities and the group norms of the sorority chapter they join. Therefore, Panhellenic sororities are valuable groups to analyze to understand the experiences of marginalized individuals, such as LGBTQ+ people, in terms of how aspects related to identity affect their communication with other sorority members and how they use communication to manage their multiple identities.

Identity Construction and Communication in Panhellenic Sororities

Sororities are social groups that inform members' communication choices as they construct and enact their identities (Evans, 2023). The beliefs that circulate throughout sororities create an exclusive environment that isolates and marginalizes members with non-dominant identities, making it harder for them to develop a strong commitment to their sorority (Bielaska, 2023; Sasso, 2018). Sororities search for members who are a good fit, which is often based on

Christian values, whiteness, and cisheteronormativity (Evans 2023; Garcia, 2019; Stone & Gorga, 2014). These expectations normalize dominant identities and stigmatize anyone who does not meet those standards, making it harder for members to communicate identities that do not fit group norms. Intersectionality (i.e., the concept that one's various identities related to their race, gender, class, sexuality, and more interact to create unique lived experiences) complicates these standards as individuals with multiple non-dominant identities have additional barriers to meeting expectations that sororities set to be considered a 'good' member and have the chance to solidify their social identity within the sorority (Crenshaw, 1991). Individuals not only have to consider their gender and sexuality, but also any aspects of identity that could defy their sorority's group norms, as seen with LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who are people of color who have to consider race in addition to their sexuality and gender when communicating with others (Barber et al., 2024; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019). Expanding on these expectations, previous research has shown that sororities' standards for identity expression are largely based on physical presentation that pressure women to dress themselves, do their hair and makeup, and post pictures on social media that align with group norms (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. F., 1965; Worthen, 2014). The authority that sororities have over sorority members and social practices within sororities encourages women to communicate their identities in ways that conform as much as possible, leading to members feeling both pressure and sometimes a desire to communicate in ways that meet expectations to fit in with the sorority (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Kopec, 2018).

However, these expectations do vary based on the social contexts and are often amplified in southern institutions where conservative Christian-based beliefs are commonly stronger regulators of the thoughts, behaviors, and identity presentations of sorority women (Berbary,

2012; Evans, 2023). Specifically regarding sexuality, research has led to mixed results stating that sororities can be more likely to have anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, can be open to LGBTQ+ members if they are *homonormative* (i.e., members align LGBTQ+ identity presentation with heterosexual norms; Robinson, 2016) and keep their LGBTQ+ identities private, or can be completely accepting of LGBTQ+ identities (Evans, 2023; Neumann, 2012; Worthen, 2014). One explanation for these differing results could be the geographic and organizational culture of the sorority chapters, as these factors have been found to dictate social and communicative norms, behaviors, and what it means to be a good fit, sorority member, and woman (Evans, 2023; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Ward & Schneider, 2009). For example, sororities with highly cisheteronormative organizational cultures will likely have more expectations for members to communicate their identity in cisheteronormative ways in order to fit in compared to sororities with less cisheteronormative organizational cultures. Yet, no matter the social contexts, culture, or expectations, the environment and expectations for identity presentation for sorority members influence the perceptions and realities of sorority women and the ways they communicate identity, as they are all subject to the consistent power and control of sororities and their group norms.

Incentives for Conforming to Expectations

When sorority members do not meet expectations, they are confronted with the possibility of losing their sense of belonging, self-esteem, social support, and social identity, leading to negative academic, health, and social outcomes, and this is especially true for potential, new, and minoritized members (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018; Scott, C. R., 2007). Despite these possible consequences, sororities still attract a variety of different individuals because of the

various benefits that can come with group membership and a strongly committed social identity, such as a sense of belonging, self-esteem, social support, and social power (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Chapman, 2008; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018). Being part of a socially powerful group with strong interpersonal connections, such as a sorority, makes individuals feel important and supported, leading to better academic, health, and social outcomes (Barber et al., 2024; Bielaska, 2023). Considering these possible positive effects, sorority members have meaningful motivations to construct and communicate their identities in ways that conform to their sorority's expectations. It is not just about being a part of an organization, but having access to opportunities to succeed personally, academically, and socially (Barber et al., 2024; Bielaska, 2023).

Surveillance and Identity Communication Regulations

As a way of maintaining authority, control, and cohesive social identities, sororities utilize surveillance, often covertly, of public and private identity communication (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. B., 2018; Scott, J. F., 1965). Public and private spaces are defined, communicated to members directly and indirectly, and sometimes weaponized to create and enforce expectations of appropriate identity communication based on power structures and norms (Evans, 2023). The public is associated with regulation, while the private is considered a safe place for individual expression away from public scrutiny (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Evans, 2023). Privacy is used to police identity communication by dictating what should and should not be discussed publicly, contributing to the stigmatization of privatized aspects of identity like sexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Norms about what should and should not be a part of public spaces influence individuals' communication and behaviors through constructed feelings of surveillance and pressure to conform to meet societal and social group expectations. For example, in many

Panhellenic sororities, members are often told to avoid publicly discussing politics, boys/ relationships, partying, religion, and class during recruitment to avoid portraying their sorority in ways that do not align with the sorority's ideal social identity (Scott, J. B., 2018). These rules can be useful for communicating a sorority's social identity to others. However, they can also regulate how members communicate their identities and make it harder for some members to share information about themselves that would help them connect with others in public settings.

In sororities, feelings of surveillance stem from organizational leadership (e.g., sorority members in leadership positions within specific chapters, leaders at the national level within the NPC, and alumni who invest in sororities physically, emotionally, and financially), which constructs, perpetuates, and enforces expectations (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. F., 1956). Rules within sororities dictate what sorority members can look like (e.g., expecting members to always have their hair and makeup done or dress in accordance to preset lookbooks for sorority events), talk about (e.g., discouraging members from publicly talking about chapter practices or topics that go against the chapters values like partying or engaging in sexually explicit activities), and post online (e.g., not allowing members to post pictures of them partying or use vulgar language in posts), essentially regulating their identity expression in public and at times in private settings (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. B., 2018; Scott, J. F, 1965).

Sorority officers (i.e., those who hold leadership positions) are plentiful and are a part of the power structure that is used to manage sorority members' identity communication (Berbary, 2012; Scott, J. F, 1965). The control amplifies the pressure sorority members feel to portray a certain image and meet social group expectations. *Standard meetings*, meetings meant to address members who break rules (e.g., drinking alcohol during a work week, sharing posts deemed inappropriate, not participating in required sorority events, etc.), are one way officers police

other sorority members' behaviors and self-presentations (Berbary, 2012). This regulation of behaviors and identity communication applies to the sorority officers as well. To be an officer, sorority members must meet and surpass the standards for identity presentation, or risk losing their status (Evans, 2023). In sororities, no one is safe from the surveillance and regulation of identity communication, as a cohesive social identity for the sorority is highly prioritized. Therefore, it is important for members to be cognizant of their sorority's expectations and methods for surveillance and regulation as they develop their identity as a sorority member and decide how to communicate their identities in line with the sorority's group identity.

LGBTQ+ Identities in Panhellenic Sororities

As more women joined colleges and Panhellenic sororities started developing in the mid-1800s, some women on college campuses began exploring romantic connections with one another (Campbell, 2012; Littlefield, 2016). At the same time, understanding of sexuality evolved, where sex was not just for procreation, but also pleasure and connection (Campbell, 2012). However, by the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, ideas about sexuality from Sigmund Freud shifted conversations, and progress towards acceptance of intimacy between women diminished (Campbell, 2012). It was a long fight for LGBTQ+ individuals to be recognized as people with LGBTQ+ identities and not just people who had LGBTQ+ relationships, and it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the fight for gay rights led to the development of student-led gay rights organizations, increasing LGBTQ+ visibility on college campuses (Bielaska, 2023; Littlefield, 2016). This defining fight marked an important shift where LGBTQ+ identities were legitimized and able to be considered identities.

Historically, LGBTQ+ individuals have been a part of Greek life organizations, but due to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ identities and cisheteronormativity, visibility of these

individuals has been limited (Anderson, 2021). Various forms of oppression, including *ideological oppression* (oppression stemming from the idea that one group is better than another and should be able to control the group that is less than), *institutional oppression* (oppression that comes from the power society gives one group over the other which is enforced through the laws, policies, and institutions), *interpersonal oppression* (oppression that is communicated verbally and through actions from other individuals based on unspoken social rules and structures), and *internalized oppression* (oppression through self-regulation due to internalized anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs) make it harder for LGBTQ+ sorority members to enter and remain in sororities peacefully (Ramirez & Duran, 2024).

As time has gone on, the NPC has taken steps to become more accepting of LGBTQ+ members, but these steps are often limited to general statements about diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (National Panhellenic Conference, 2019; National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.). The NPC still holds the right to be an organization only for women, as they have exemption from Title IX rules about sex-based discrimination, even though not all sorority members identify as women (Evans, 2023; National Panhellenic Conference, 2025). These rights do not clearly define rules for gender diverse members who may be two-spirit, trans, queer, or gender non-conforming (2STQGNC). While some sororities have made the effort to include 2STQGNC individuals, others have not (Bielaska, 2023; Evans, 2023). The lack of explicit rules contributes to the difficulty that established and potential new LGBTQ+ sorority members experience when trying to navigate the sorority experience. Unfortunately, this is only one of the many barriers that LGBTQ+ individuals face when it comes to sorority involvement.

The Role of Group Norms for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

When individuals are contemplating which ways they want to communicate their identities, they take in cues from group norms to inform their choices (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Since identity is socially constructed and subject to power dynamics, identity and the communication of identity are influenced by societal and group norms (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Hoggs & Reid, 2006). In sororities, group norms replicate societal expectations about identity performance that perpetuate cisheteronormativity (Biddix et al., 2024; Bielaska, 2023). Individuals who are LGBTQ+ may join sororities because, like those who are cisgender and heterosexual, they are subject to gender and sexuality norms and are expected to conform to gender binaries and *compulsive heterosexuality,* the pressure to be heterosexual (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Rich, 2003).

The intersectionality of gender and sexuality is highly influential for LGBTQ+ sorority members' identity communication, as they must conform to group norms about gender and sexuality despite having non-dominant identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Evans, 2023; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). These issues are compounded when members have additional minoritized identities, especially for LGBTQ+ members who are people of color at PWI, as sororities' group norms are not just based on expectations for cisheteronormativity, but also Christian and white identities (Barber et al., 2024; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019). The experiences of LGBTQ+ sorority members cannot be understood without considering intersectionality, as all aspects of one's identities are intrinsically tied to one another and mutually shape one's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Overall, one's intersectionality of identities and the social contexts of their sorority shape the ways in which LGBTQ+ sorority members can communicate their identities.

While these expectations from sororities group norms can be restrictive, they also offer a guideline on how to meet societal expectations and perform gender and sexuality in a way that

can be affirming, offer them social power, and allow them to develop a more prototypical and cohesive social identity (Barber et al., 2024; Bielaska, 2023; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Sasso, 2018; Scott, J.B., 2007). Those who portray dominant identities within the sorority (e.g., appearing to be hegemonically feminine and cisheteronormative) can serve as an example and support system for LGBTQ+ members who are trying to fit in (Bielaska, 2023; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Sasso, 2018**)**. Individuals can learn what is considered ideal identity communication through *girl talk*, where members communicate evaluations of other members' identity performance (Anderson**,** 2021; Berbary, 2012). Relying on group communication about individuals' identity communication can be informative, as one uses cues from group norms to inform their own identity communication choices. If LGBTQ+ sorority members can recognize and replicate group norms for identity communication, they can access institutional and social safety that comes from sororities and explore different ways of communicating their identity due to the assumption that all sorority women are cisgender and heterosexual (Bielaska, 2023; Evans, 2023).

Cisheteronormative Group Norms for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

Sorority members, especially LGBTQ+ sorority members, must adjust their behavior to meet group norms for gender and sexuality identity communication based on cisheteronormativity to establish and maintain group membership and the social identity of the sorority (Berbary, 2012; Boyd, 1999; Evans, 2023; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Kopec, 2018; Scott, J. F, 1965; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001; Worthen, 2014). Both gender and sexuality are socially constructed through ritualistic, performative, and communicative social processes (Butler, 1988; Ward & Schneider, 2009). In sororities, cisheteronormativity can manifest through individuals performing gender during rush week (the

week-long recruitment process for sororities) as they portray hyper-femininity with extravagant hair, makeup, and clothing in alignment with the lookbooks they are given, or it can look like members bringing male partners to date parties, even when they are not romantically or sexually interested in them, because they are expected to portray a heterosexual identity (Boyd, 1999; Evans, 2023; Scott, J.B., 2018; Scott, J. F, 1965). By conforming to group norms, LGBTQ+ members are able to reinforce the sorority's group cohesion and maintain a positive social group identity. Research has shown that sororities are ranked higher socially if they are seen to be more cisheteronormatively attractive and socially powerful than other sororities, so being able to portray cisheteronormative identities is important for the evaluation of the group's social identity (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020).

The Effects of Cisheteronormative Group Norms on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Identity Communication

Cisheteronormative expectations lead to sorority members using what Stone and Gorga (2014) call containment practices to avoid accepting members who they feel are not a good fit for their social group. This process creates out-groups for individuals who embody *pariah femininities*, expressions of feminine identity that do not align with hegemonic femininity (e.g., LGBTQ+ identities), and is often done by directly communicating that someone does not align with the sorority's social identity, pressuring individuals with pariah femininities to conceal the unfavorable parts of their identity, or designating a sorority on campus as the social group where members with undesirable traits belong (Schippers, 2007; Stone & Gorga, 2014). This process could include not accepting a nonbinary PNM because they would not fit into the culture of the sorority, encouraging an established member not to disclose her identity as a bisexual woman, or

suggesting that a lesbian PNM should join a sorority on campus that is known for having LGBTQ+ members.

Individuals are expected to know, understand, and meet gender norms for their sorority, which becomes difficult as each sorority has unique social contexts that shape their expectations, and these expectations are often indirectly communicated (Evans, 2023; Stone & Gorga, 2014). Sorority members and PNMS who are LGBTQ+ and trying to manage communication of their LGBTQ+ identities may use avoidance (e.g., repressing their LGBTQ+ identity), passing (e.g., hiding their LGBTQ+ identity and portraying a false non-LGBTQ+ identity), and assimilation (meeting the standards to become a cohesive part of the social group) to cope with the oppression (Ramirez & Duran, 2024). The combination of containment practices and oppression management strategies complicates communication for LGBTQ+ sorority members and adds to the burden they carry as they try to manage their multiple social identities as sorority members and LGBTQ+ people. Potential new and established LGBTQ+ sorority members are consistently confronted with this regulation of identity communication and must make a choice to conform, leave, or present themselves authentically and face potential rejection.

The Effects of Rejection on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Identity Communication

The fear of rejection can cause LGBTQ+ sorority members to conceal their LGBTQ+ identity from other members and attempt to present themselves in a way that aligns with the sorority's social identity to maintain group membership (Campbell, 2012; Evans, 2023). Members who are LGBTQ+ can often garner more acceptance if they hide their LGBTQ+ identity when they join and avoid disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity until they are an established member and have made bonds with other sorority members (Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer and Freeman, 2001). Even after LGBTQ+ identity disclosure, LGBTQ+ members must then

consider how public they want to be with their LGBTQ+ identity expression, as being too loud and proud could lead to rejection (Stone & Gorga, 2014). While cisgender heterosexual members can tell stories about crushes on boys or the latest date they went on, LGBTQ+ members could be seen as trying to shove their sexuality in people's faces by making their identity "too" public. There is pressure to be a "good" LGBTQ+ member who seemingly aligns with the social identity of the sorority (Anderson, 2021). Any deviation could lead to rejection and the loss of social support, power, and sorority member identity (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018; Scott, C.R., 2007).

The ability to avoid rejection through identity concealment is a privilege that not everyone has. For example, some trans women may be identifiably trans and not able to hide their LGBTQ+ gender identity. While some sororities are becoming more accepting of LGBTQ+ sexualities, very few go out of their way to make transgender individuals feel welcome (Goodman et al., 2023). The intersectionality of gender and sexuality influences the ways people can utilize identity communication, especially in gender-segregated spaces like sororities (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Another regulated identity that cannot be concealed is race. The ways individuals can communicate aspects of their identity, like gender and sexuality, are affected by race, as sororities also have an ingrained expectation for whiteness stemming from their exclusionary roots (Barber et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1991; Garcia, 2019; Lemerand & Duran, 2024). The fear of rejection is influenced by the intersectionality of one's identity, as their gender, sexuality, race, and more shape the choices and power they have for identity communication (Crenshaw, 1991).

Influential Factors for LGBTQ+ Identity Disclosure in Panhellenic Sororities

Group norms influence all aspects of identity communication but are especially impactful for LGBTQ+ identity disclosure, because, as mentioned, identity disclosure opens one up to the possibility of rejection (Evans, 2023; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer and Freeman, 2001). Additionally, one might conceal their LGBTQ+ identity for other reasons, including, but not limited to, Don't Ask, Don't Tell group norms, disclosure being perceived as unnecessary, and personal protection (Evans, 2023; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Littlefield, 2016; Windmeyer and Freeman, 2001). Don't Ask, Don't Tell group norms describe the social pressure, and at times legal enforcement (e.g., the legal regulation of public communication of one's LGBTQ+ identity in the military; United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2011), for individuals to minimize public communication of their LGBTQ+ identity in order to be accepted (Literte & Hodge, 2012; Stone & Gorga, 2014). Don't Ask, Don't Tell group norms can be common in Greek life as members are often expected to keep their non-dominant identities (e.g., being LGBTQ+) private (Stone & Gorga, 2014). With this expected silence, conversations about LGBTQ+ identities are limited to contain nondominant identities under the guise of moral protection from discomfort that could arise from LGBTQ+ people being sorority members (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Stone & Gorga, 2014). The immense pressure to conform to cisheteronormativity can lead to LGBTQ+ identities never being openly communicated (Evans, 2023).

Due to Don't Ask, Don't Tell group norms and personal reasons, some people do not share their LGBTQ+ identity with other sorority members; they do not believe that LGBTQ+ identity disclosure is important because they do not perceive their LGBTQ+ identity as relevant to their sorority membership (Littlefield, 2016). They themselves see being LGBTQ+ as a more private matter, so there is little to no reason for it to come up publicly (Littlefield, 2016). The

making and maintaining of what should be public versus private in terms of gender and sexuality impacts identity expression norms and LGBTQ+ identity disclosure, as it influences societal expectations, group norms, and personal beliefs about LGBTQ+ identity communication (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Evans, 2023).

However, social contexts do inform the severity of these influences and concerns, as those in more progressive northern sororities tend to be more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities and public communication of LGBTQ+ identities compared to less progressive southern sororities (Ellemers et al., 2002; Evans, 2023). With sororities that are more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, there can be a cycle of acceptance, disclosure, and visibility that leads to new LGBTQ+ sorority members being more willing to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity publicly within their sorority (Evans, 2023). Still, while some may want to be open about their LGBTQ+ identity, they may still avoid disclosure for personal protection. Regardless of a sorority being accepting, there could be outside fears of others (e.g., family, community members, other students, etc.) finding out about their LGBTQ+ identity that prevent someone from disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity to anyone, including other sorority members. The fear that comes with public communication of LGBTQ+ identities limits conversations, even in private settings within sororities (e.g., during private interpersonal conversations with other sorority members; Evans, 2023). To further understand the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members think about and enact communication of their social identities, it can be useful to utilize SIT as a theoretical framework.

SIT as a Theoretical Framework for Studying LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

The Development and Enactment of Social Identities

SIT facilitates the analysis and understanding of social identities, such as those of sorority members, LGBTQ+ individuals, and specifically, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Oftentimes, individuals' identities evolve through communicative social processes and are defined in terms of the social groups to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This process is seen with LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who may communicate their identities in alignment with their sorority's social identity to solidify their group membership and show those in and outside of the sorority that they are a part of the social group (Evans, 2023; Stone & Gorga, 2014). When social groups come together, social identities can develop as individuals acknowledge their group membership, feel an emotional connection to the group, and begin to see themselves as a part of a whole (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This development of a committed social identity can be harder for Panhellenic sorority members with marginalized identities (e.g., those who are LGBTQ+) due to the exclusive nature of sororities that differentiates and separates those who do not fit in with the rest of the social group (Bielaska, 2023; Sasso, 2018). Communication is used to create and legitimize social identities by defining what they are and how they differ from other social groups and identities, so if one cannot or does not communicate in ways that align with their sorority's social identity, they will not be able to create and legitimize their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority member (Gillig et al., 2022). The social identity of Panhellenic sororities not only affects the communicative choices LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members make, but also the development of their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority member.

Additionally, social identity is greatly influential regarding how people feel about, perceive, and enact communication as they rely on social identities to make sense of their own

and others' identities based on their similarities and differences (Ellemers et al., 2002; Gillig et al., 2022). This is seen with LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members as the way they perceive expectations communicated directly and indirectly from their sorority informs how they understand and feel about their sorority's social identity and their identities as LGBTQ+ individuals and Panhellenic sorority members, along with how they communicate in response to those understandings and feelings. An example of this includes how LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members perceive their own feelings and those of their sororities to understand the importance and risks of disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity to other sorority members (e.g., feelings that it is unnecessary to disclose LGBTQ+ identities or that disclosing LGBTQ+ identities could lead to rejection), and then use that understanding to decide whether they will communicate their LGBTQ+ identity in their sorority (Campbell, 2012; Evans, 2023; Littlefield, 2016; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer and Freeman, 2001). Together, these communicative experiences of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members align with claims made by SIT regarding the relationship between social identities and communication, as social identities are created and enacted through communication, and communication is shaped by social identities.

Possible Positives of and Threats to Social Identities

When people are in a social group that they care about, identify with, and feel valued in, they develop a positive self-concept, self-esteem, and sense of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). These possible positive effects reflect the various benefits of sorority membership that attract individuals to join them (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Chapman, 2008; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018). Specifically, one's sense of belonging is interconnected with their social identity because the degree of connection one has to their social group influences their feelings of commitment, and in turn, the communication

decisions they make as the more committed they are the more they will want to communicate in ways that align with their social group's social identity (Copeland et al., 2025; Hogg & Abrahms, 1998; Lee, 2014). Due to these possible positive effects and influences of social identities, social identities are important for individuals in social groups.

However, their social identities can be compromised by *social identity threats* when the social identity of a social group is at risk of being perceived negatively (Branscombe et al., 1999; Martiny & Nikitin, 2019). Social identity threats include *categorization threats* (when someone is non-consensually perceived as a part of the group and judged because of it), *distinctiveness threats* (when the uniqueness of the group is threatened), *threats to value* (when the value of the group is questioned), and *acceptance threats* (when a member is at risk of being rejected by the group; Branscombe et al., 1999). Examples of each of these threats could appear in sororities and shape the ways members identify with and communicate in their sororities.

First, a categorization threat could look like a member possibly being perceived as LGBTQ+ when they do not want to because their sorority is cisheteronormative, leading to them limiting communication of their LGBTQ+ identity so that they will not be categorized as a part of the LGBTQ+ community and judged for not fitting in. Second, sororities could worry about experiencing a distinctiveness threat if people do not want to join because they do not see them as any different from other sororities on campus, and in turn, may communicate in ways that differentiate themselves from other sororities so that they can attract new members (e.g., a sorority defining themselves as a more accepting sorority than others on campus so that those who may not fit in to other sororities will want to join). Third, if sororities do not offer value to members, there is no reason for anyone to join, which could encourage them to communicate the possible positives of having access to a community that will increase one's sense of belonging,

self-esteem, and social power. Finally, an LGBTQ+ sorority member could be faced with an acceptance threat if they disclose their LGBTQ+ identity and are perceived to be communicating a pariah femininity that would lead to them being rejected from the sorority. In response, this individual may attempt to communicate in ways that conceal their LGBTQ+ identity and align with hegemonic femininity. Overall, these are just some of the ways identity threats could manifest in sororities.

Continuing, social identity threats can come from various sources and affect one's interest in participating in a social group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Martiny & Nikitin, 2019). Strongly identified and committed members are more likely to defend the social group and their social identity, whereas those with weak identification and commitment are more likely to stop identifying with and leave the social group (Branscombe et al., 1999). For LGBTQ+ sorority members, this could look like those who feel connected to their sorority choosing to highlight the positive aspects of their group membership when confronted with negative perceptions from individuals outside of their sorority, compared to those who choose to leave because they do not feel connected to their sorority. When individuals feel out of place within their social groups and struggle to feel a sense of commitment to their social identity, but cannot leave the group, they often redefine their group membership into something that they align with. They may also create change in their social group to better meet their expectations and needs and to maintain the benefits of positive and committed group membership (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). While LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members typically have the option of leaving their sorority, there may be social pressures from other sorority members, alumnae, family, or others that make it difficult for them to leave (e.g., those who have a family history of being in sororities and feel

the need to stay to continue the legacy). Therefore, instead of leaving, as described by SIT's claims, they may redefine how they think about their sorority or try to change their sorority.

In-Groups and Out-Groups

The assignment of social identities is done through *social categorization*, a process through which people are grouped together due to a shared identity (Tajfel, 1974). During the process of social categorization, communication is used to highlight similarities and differences to differentiate the various social groups (Gillig et al., 2022). One example of social categorization in Panhellenic sororities is the comparison and ranking of sororities as top, middle, or bottom-tier sororities, where fraternities and sororities can communicate the stereotypes of sororities to solidify the similarities and differences of each sorority and the levels of sorority ranking (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J.B., 2018). Social categorization leads to the creation of *in-groups* (those who identify as a part of the group) and *out-groups* (those who do not identify as a part of the group) as individuals make sense of their social standing (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1974). This is also seen in Panhellenic sororities as sororities identify members who are or are not a good fit for the social group during rush, which is often based on Christian values, whiteness, and cisheteronormativity, but can vary depending on the social context and expectations of the sorority (Evans 2023; Garcia, 2019; Stone & Gorga, 2014).

In-groups have group norms (i.e., expectations for ways of being, thinking, and behaving) that create communication standards that help solidify in-group identities, inform individuals' communication choices, and assist them in understanding their group's communication by outlining what is normative and highlighting the contrast between in-groups and out-groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006). In Panhellenic sororities, group norms are largely influential as the specific group norms for each chapter shape the construction and enactment of members'

identities (e.g., discriminatory group norms minimize diversity of identity development and communication while more inclusive group norms allow individuals to develop and communicate their identities more freely; Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Campbell, 2012; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019; Sasso, 2018). As in-groups define themselves, they rely on *social comparison*, a process used to assess and assign value to their group by comparing themselves and their group to other groups, with the goal of achieving a positive perception of their social identities to maintain a positive self-concept and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Social context influences the perceptions of social identities as positive or negative, as societal factors (e.g., power structures and social norms regarding gender, race, sexuality) and settings contribute to the evaluation (Ellemers et al., 2002; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2010). Panhellenic sororities can utilize stereotypes and social ranking to socially compare themselves to other Panhellenic sororities, and their perceptions could vary depending on social contexts. While the members of one sorority may view themselves as better than other sororities because they are a cisheteronormative and hegemonically feminine top-tier sorority, others in a bottom-tier sorority may view themselves as better than those in top-tier sororities because they are more diverse and inclusive. Additionally, some Panhellenic sororities may not have access to the same rank-based stereotypes if they do not have the social factor of a ranking system on their campus, such as those on campuses with smaller Greek life communities (Scott, J.B., 2018). During this process of striving for positive social group image through group differentiation, discrimination can occur in Panhellenic sororities as members create and rely on stereotypes that portray their social group positively, perceive other social groups negatively, and perpetuate social hierarchy in the pursuit of a social identity that is distinct and positive compared to others (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2010).

Intersectionality of Social Identities

It would be infeasible to have a genuine understanding of the experiences and communication of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members without considering the intersectionality of their multiple social identities because it is known that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members with multiple marginalized identities experience additional barriers in sororities with a lack of diversity and inclusivity, the intersectionality of gender and sexuality are influential for identity communication, and the varying levels of power one has due to the intersectionality of their identities informs their fear of rejection related to communicating about their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Evans, 2023; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Additionally, it is important to consider the intersectionality of their identities since additional issues can arise when individuals exist within many social groups at once and develop multiple and complex social identities that sometimes conflict (Bulmer, 2013; Crenshaw, 19991; Evans, 2023; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Typically, an individual will not be a member of conflicting social groups at the same time, but it can happen and can lead to personal and interpersonal conflict (Bulmer, 2013; Evans, 2023; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Although there are LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who do not experience issues related to their intersectional social identities of being LGBTQ+, Panhellenic sorority members, and more, there are those who do (Evans, 2023; Scott, J. B., 2018).

The Current Study

Previous research has shown that sororities are a hub for community building, social learning, identity exploration, and social identity development (Barber et al, 2024; Evans, 2023; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001). The multiple factors of the social contexts they are in, the group norms of their sorority, and their intersectional identities inform the

communication choices they make and the ways they develop their social identities as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members (Barber et al., 2024; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019; Scott, J. B., 2018; Stone & Gorga, 2014). Even when identity exploration is restricted, LGBTQ+ individuals can utilize their sorority membership to learn about themselves, others, and institutionally and socially acceptable ways to communicate their identity (Barber et al., 2024; Stone & Gorga, 2014; Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001). As individuals depersonalize their self-perception, and their sorority social identity becomes more salient, they can increase feelings of belonging through group identification (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Even though developing a sense of belonging is more complicated for LGBTQ+ members due to their minoritized identity, especially if they have other minoritized identities, it is still possible and valuable (Copeland et al., 2025).

Overall, while clear connections can be made between the literature on sororities generally, Panhellenic sororities specifically, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, intersectionality, and the role of communication in the development, enactment, and understanding of social identities as defined by social identity theory, research on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and sororities more broadly has rarely used a communicative lens to focus on the importance of communication for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members as they navigate having multiple intersectional identities in their sorority. Therefore, it would be beneficial to study how communication is both affected by intersectional social identities and how it can be used to manage intersectional social identities, to better understand LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and others who have multiple, intersectional, and sometimes conflicting social identities. To address this need for understanding, the following research questions will be investigated:

RQ1: What aspects of identity shape the ways LGBTQ+ sorority members communicate with other sorority members?

RQ2: In what ways do LGBTQ+ sorority members use communication to manage their multiple intersectional social identities?

Methods

Participants

There were seventeen participants in the study. The sample size of 17 participants was chosen in alignment with the data analysis method of reflexive TA, where the goal for the sample size was dependent on the data collection method, the emergence of patterns in responses, and the homogeneity of the population being studied (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The sample needed to be small enough to be realistic based on the interview data collection process and large enough to account for diverse experiences and the development of themes.

To be a part of the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old, identify as LGBTQ+, and be a member of an NPC sorority or have been a member of an NPC sorority in the past. All participants had to have experience being in a PNC sorority for at least a semester to ensure they had had enough time to develop a social identity as a sorority member. The time requirement for how long they were in the sorority was not longer because the length of their participation provided useful insight to the study (e.g., insights regarding whether the amount of time they were involved reflected their sense of commitment to their social identity). The study focused on Panhellenic sororities because the culture of Panhellenic sororities is unique to the organization. Including other organizations could create a confounding variable. These were the only inclusion and exclusion criteria. In addition to these criteria, demographics were collected, including age, race, sex, gender, sexuality, geographic location they were born in, the geographic

location of their sorority, the time they spent in their sorority, and how long it has been since they left their sorority (for those who were no longer active members).

Seventeen individuals participated in the study. Age ranged from 19 to 33 years old (M = 25.76; SD = 3.7). Thirteen participants were White, one was Asian, one was Native American or Alaska Native, one was a combination of Asian, Hispanic or Latino/Latina, and White, and one preferred not to specify their ethnicity. 17 participants were cisgender women, and one identified as nonbinary and genderfluid. Eight participants were lesbian, seven were bisexual, and two were queer. Within the United States, 12 participants were from the South, four were from the Midwest, and one was from the West. 11 participants were in sororities in the South, five were in sororities in the Midwest, and one was in a sorority in the Northeast. The time individuals spent in their sororities ranged from one to four years (M = 3.12; SD = 1.21). One participant was an active Panhellenic sorority member, and 16 participants were no longer active members. For the 16 participants who were no longer active members of their Panhellenic sorority, the average time since participants had left their sorority was 4.38 years (SD = 3.1). Key participant demographics are summarized in table 1.

Procedure

After Institutional Review Board approval was received, I recruited participants through convenience sampling methods, including sharing a recruitment flyer (see Appendix E) in person and via social media posts on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, I reached out to contacts, including individuals from an initial pilot study on sorority members, via email (Evans, 2023). Lastly, snowball sampling was used as participants were welcomed to invite other individuals who are or were LGBTQ+ sorority members to participate in the study. I used multiple sampling

methods to optimize recruitment and reach as many potential participants as possible as the population was limited.

Individuals who viewed the recruitment message(s) and chose to participate in the study responded to a five-minute Qualtrics survey, which first asked for consent (see Appendix C) and then asked them questions to determine their eligibility based on whether they were LGBTQ+, a current or previous NPC sorority member for a semester or more, and at least 18 years old. Individuals who were not eligible were not allowed to respond to the rest of the survey or participate in an interview. Those who were eligible were able to continue filling out the survey. They were asked to respond to demographic questions and given the opportunity to schedule an interview. If the individual chose to participate in an interview, they were directed to a Calendly page, where they could schedule a semi-structured 60-minute interview that took place over Zoom.

Interviews were semi-structured. The framing of the interview questions (i.e., if questions were asked in the present tense or past tense) varied based on whether they were current members (see Appendix A) or past members (see Appendix B). At the beginning of the interview, I confirmed that the interviewee still consented to participating in the study by completing a second consent form (see Appendix D). All participants consented, and audio recording and transcription took place with Zoom's recording and transcription features. During the interviews, I asked participants questions about their experience in their sorority, if/ how they talked about being LGBTQ+ in their sorority, the ways that they communicated with sorority members, and the relationships they had in their sorority. The current analysis does not focus on the relationships they had in their sorority, but the data were still coded in case any of the findings related to the study's research questions. The average interview time was 56.59 minutes

(SD = 13.32). After the interview process, I compensated participants with online gift cards. Participants received $1 for completing the five-minute survey and $25 for completing the hour-long interview, for a total of $26. Once data collection was complete, transcripts were de-identified, resulting in 252 single-spaced pages of data. Finally, data analysis occurred.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed with MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program, to identify themes based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach for reflexive TA and SIT (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Reflexive TA was chosen because of its theoretical flexibility, which allowed me to use SIT for my theoretical framework, and its ability to help me identify patterns that became in-depth themes throughout the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). SIT was utilized as a guiding synthesizing framework. While SIT has largely been used quantitatively to focus on the outcomes of communicative processes, this project used SIT to understand the communicative mechanisms through which these processes happen. The goal was not to test SIT, but to use its guiding principles about how identity operates.

Regarding the coding process, I followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for reflexive TA. The steps for reflexive TA included: (1) familiarizing myself with the data so patterns in the findings could be identified, (2) developing beginning codes to capture the basic ideas from the data, (3) organizing the basic ideas into larger themes, (4) reviewing themes for accuracy and clarification, (5) defining the themes, and finally, (5) writing the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive and inductive approach was used during the coding process. For the deductive approach, I used SIT as my theoretical framework to identify patterns based on its preexisting tenets and concepts. For the inductive approach, I used reflexive TA to identify new patterns and themes that might not directly align with preestablished ideas from SIT.

Validation Strategies

To ensure the validity of the findings, I utilized three validation strategies. Due to my identity as an LGBTQ+ individual who has experienced being an LGBTQ+ sorority member, I use reflexivity to acknowledge that my experience is not reflective of all other LGBTQ+ sorority members and be forthright that my identities and previous experiences may affect the way I understand the data (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Second, I used expert debriefing, as I consulted my committee members, who are experts in the communication field, as I developed my themes during data analysis. Finally, I included negative case analysis, where I highlighted findings that did not align well with one another to provide an authentic account of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Through the use of these three validation strategies, I strengthened the validity of my analysis.

Positionality Statement

Since this research is heavily focused on identity, I understand it is important for me to share how my identities may influence the ways I went about my research and analyzed the data. I am an LGBTQ+ white cisgender woman. I have previously been in a sorority in the South and have had many experiences interacting with sorority members with diverse identities in various states. While I feel neutral about my time as an LGBTQ+ sorority member, I know that my previous experiences provided context that influenced my understanding of the sorority experience. Additionally, I recognize my privileges as a white, cisgender, and mostly gender conforming person, which allowed me to have a privileged experience as an LGBTQ+ sorority member. Academically, I have a background in women's and gender studies, along with communication, that deeply influences the work I do and allows me to take an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach when conducting research. Due to my academic background, I find it

important to avoid overgeneralizations of lived experiences, and I aim to provide a rich analysis that authentically reflects the complexity of intersectionality and the lived experiences of the participants. Considering my identities and experiences, throughout the interview process, I did not act based on assumptions and asked the participants to explain all terms they used and experiences they had, even if I was familiar with them or had similar experiences myself.

Findings

The interviews provided valuable and rich data to answer the research questions: RQ1) What aspects of identity shape the ways LGBTQ+ sorority members communicate with other sorority members? And RQ2) In what ways do LGBTQ+ sorority members use communication to manage their multiple, intersectional identities? Findings detailing how LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had to consider their individual identities, group identities, and structural forces when making communication decisions answer RQ1 (Table 2). The ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members strategically used communication to fit in with Panhellenic sorority group norms, resist Panhellenic sorority group norms, manage outgroup perceptions of their sorority, and overall manage their multiple social identities answer RQ2 (Table 3). Further investigations of each of the themes and how they answer the research questions provide greater insight into the experiences and communication choices of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Aspects of Identity that Shape LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Communication with Other Panhellenic Sorority Members

Individual Social Identities

These LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members discussed the influences of the various social identities they had individually, in addition to their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority

member, which answered RQ1. The impacts of these different identities varied depending on the intersectionality of their identities and how well or poorly their multiple social identities fit into the group norms of their sorority.

Sexuality. The individuals in more open Panhellenic sororities commonly said that their sexuality was not overly impactful because their sorority was more accepting, they did not consider their sexuality to be a dominant social identity for themselves, and/ or conversations about sexuality did not come up often with other sorority members. Nina was one of the participants who identified with all of these reasons. When talking about her feelings regarding her sexuality as an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member, she said, “It doesn't impact my day-to-day life, because I don't lead with it.” For her, since her sexuality did not feel like an overly impactful social identity, she did not feel the need to communicate about it with other sorority members. However, sexuality would indirectly come up for some of these individuals if they were in romantic relationships, particularly with other members of their sorority. This was the case for Nina, who, after explaining the lack of impact of her sexuality, continued by explaining the level of influence being in a relationship had on her communication with other members,

> I think… I felt safe enough to bring [my sexuality] up and, like, be honest about it, but… I don't think that is… a huge influencing factor on my experience… it was the relationship side that… caused the issue. And not to say that some of that relationship issue wasn't because some people were just homophobic, because I know that's the case, but… I think it was more so the relationship side that… was influential.

For Nina and other members in romantic relationships in more accepting sororities, the challenges came more from navigating being in a romantic relationship in a social group than from their sexuality. Even if there was the possibility of some individuals being homophobic, they knew that the majority of their fellow sorority members would support them, leading to them being able to communicate openly if they ever wanted to.

Unfortunately, the majority of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in this study were involved in sororities that were less accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, leading to their sexuality being a major influence on their communication with other members as they tried to manage or hide their sexuality. Lily was one of the participants who explained how she did not tell anyone in her sorority about her sexuality because,

> I think it would have turned into one of those situations where they… don't feel safe living with you, like, you could be sexualizing them, because there was just so… much of a lack of education on their behalf, that I was just like this is not a safe environment for me to be out… So it's like, why would I… willingly put that target on my back, you know?

Lily's experience explains how for those in sororities who commonly held homophobic views, avoiding communication about their sexuality was a choice they felt pressured to make for their safety.

Gender. For many of the participants, gender was not overly influential as their gender expression aligned well with their sorority's group norms. Typically, sororities expected members to be traditionally feminine, which, as Amelia explained, was not overly impactful because there were not many "non-feminine presenting people… in terms of gender and also clothing." However, those who were in sororities with more rigid expectations for traditionally feminine gender presentation, did not fit such norms, and communicated their gender identities in non-traditionally feminine ways (e.g., wearing masculine or androgynous clothing, not wearing makeup, having short or brightly colored hair) experienced difficulties as they felt the need to alter the ways they communicated their gender identity. Riley explained how she would wear "small jean shorts, tight shirts, and… dresses" to communicate a traditionally feminine identity so that she could "fit in," despite not identifying with traditional femininity. Similarly,

Beck, who currently identifies as nonbinary but was figuring out their gender identity while they were in their sorority, said,

> I've never really been around people that were… all kind of hyper feminine… so it was hard to not want to change myself to fit in, because that's what would like put me in the best position to exist in that circumstance.

Conversely, Sophia, who was in a sorority with more inclusive group norms, discussed how her sorority was so open regarding gender expression that they allowed one of their members who came out as a trans man to stay in the sorority because their priorities were more about the bonds between members than the ways members identified. Overall, the ways one's gender identity affected their communication depended on how important their gender presentation was to the sorority they were in. The more important it was to portray a traditionally feminine identity, the more participants communicated their gender identity in ways that fit the expectations communicated to them.

Intersectionality of Other Influential Identities. In addition to gender and sexuality, participants mentioned various identities, including race, political identification, religion, weight, class, mental health, neurodivergence, age, and leadership status, as being influential to the ways they communicated with other sorority members. While a couple of the participants' sororities were largely diverse, most of the participants' sororities lacked diversity in terms of some or all of these various identities. The overwhelming homogeneity of individuals often caused participants to avoid communication that would call attention to their differences as a way to fit in. Specifically, having other non-dominant identities within the sorority made it hard for them to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity publicly. Riley explained her feelings on the subject by saying, "I was gonna come out, but I… I already felt like an outsider." For Riley, the fact that she did not conform to feminine gender norms, had left the Christian faith, was not politically conservative,

and had severe difficulties with her mental health, influenced her to not want to tell her fellow sorority members about her LGBTQ+ identity out of fear that it would further isolate her from the other sorority members. Alex was another participant who echoed these views by saying,

> Being somebody that I already knew… stuck out because of how tall and large I was, made me that much more insecure about everything else… and then being somebody from the border, being somebody that has grown up being told to just tell people that you're white so they don't ask questions, caused me a lot more anxiety of being around 200 white people, so doing everything that I could to be exactly what everybody, what I thought everybody else was, took so much effort… That's exactly what I tried to do every single day.

For Alex, her communication about her sexuality was complicated by other aspects of her identity related to her weight, height, race, cultural background, and more. For her, and the other members like her, communicating about sexuality was not just about sexuality. They considered the intersectionality of all their identities to make communication choices.

Visibility of Identities. The visibility of participants' various identities largely influenced the options they had for communicating. This was true for their LGBTQ+ identities, along with others. Many of the participants mentioned that the degree to which one was able to "pass" or "present" as someone with a dominant identity (e.g., being straight, cisgender, and/ or white) made it easier or harder for them to manage communication of their identities. Nina was one of the participants who shared these feelings and said, "I can be straight, like… I'm a straight-passing woman… and sometimes I forget that people care." While Nina was in a sorority where most of the members were accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, she still recognized the ways that appearing as a non-LGBTQ+ person further limited the influence her LGBTQ+ identity had when communicating with other members. Riley, who was in a sorority that was not diverse or accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, discussed how being able to hide her non-dominant

identities in terms of her race was an advantage she had when communicating with her sorority members compared to those who were visibly people of color. She said,

> I am a quarter Japanese and a quarter Guatemalan, so I am triracial, believe it or not. Um, but I'm obviously very white-presenting, so… I claim my ethnicity to those places, to being Guatemalan and Japanese, but… I'm being seen as white, and I know that's a privilege and not something that… I take for granted.

Responses about the visibility of individuals' identities show that the ability to hide one's non-dominant identities was a privilege that allowed individuals to have access to more choices regarding how they decided to communicate their identities.

Influential Individual Social Identities Outside of LGBTQ+ Identification. It is important to note that not every participant felt that they could not talk about their sexuality because of their individual social identities outside of being a sorority member. This was particularly true for those in sororities that were predominantly accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. However, their other identities did influence their communication. As previously mentioned, sorority members who were in romantic relationships with other sorority members had to make strategic choices about whether they would discuss their relationship with other sorority members, even if they were in open sororities, because it could make things awkward, especially when it came to discussing any relationship issues they were having. A different example is members who went through traumatic events such as sexual assault, being drugged, being kidnapped, and losing a loved one. Going through these instances could negatively or positively impact communication, depending on how the sorority responded to the event. Amelia was one of the participants who "did not actively think about" communicating about her sexuality because it was "a non-event in a… really helpful, chill way." In contrast, her communication changed for the worse after she was sexually assaulted at a sorority event by someone outside of the sorority. Unfortunately, the other sorority members did not respond well to the situation and

used victim-blaming language that made Amelia "not prioritize talking to some of the members who were affiliated with that assault" and reconsider her connection to her sorority. Alternatively, Kate, who lost her father while in her sorority, did sometimes struggle with being vulnerable with some of her members after her dad passed, but overall was able to grow closer and have meaningful conversations with her sorority members who had also experienced loss. She explained her experiences by saying,

> I had, like, a series of panic attacks after my dad passed, and I lived really close to one of my sorority sisters who had lost… she had happened to lose her dad. Um, and… I, like, literally called her, like, mid-panic attack, and was like, 'Can I come over?' And she was like, 'Yeah.' She's like, 'I'll put on cartoons, and if you want to talk about it, we can talk about it, and if you don't… we won't, and you can just sit here for as long as you need to.' And I've done that for so many other people, because I didn't even know that that's what I needed. Um, and she and I weren't even that close, but I knew I could go to her. Because we have this, like, shared thing in common.

For Kate, her sorority members' responses of support after her traumatic event encouraged her to reach out to other members and communicate openly about grief. While these experiences do not involve members' LGBTQ+ identities, they do highlight the ways other social identities influence the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members communicate with other members. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members consider far more aspects of their identities than just their LGBTQ+ identities when communicating with other members.

Panhellenic Sorority Social Group Identities

The various social group identities of each sorority were some of the most influential aspects for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other members (RQ1). These group norms were specific to one's sorority chapter and were not generalizable to other sorority chapters at different campuses (e.g., the group norms for Alpha Phi at one university may be completely different from those for a different chapter of Alpha Phi at another

university). Therefore, it is important to analyze sororities in terms of their shared social identities and not group sororities together solely based on their sharing a name.

Top Houses Versus Bottom Houses. Most of the universities participants attended had an informal ranking system for the sororities on campus, ranging from top houses to bottom houses. Willow explained the ranking structure by saying,

> Everyone kind of had their own image. Like, we had one sorority that people were like, including myself, which I feel horrible, but… were, like, if this is the only sorority I get in, I don't want to go. I don't even want to be in Greek life, because it was, like… I don't want to be associated with that, because that was… the most not-sorority-looking group that you could have had. And so, you were like, I don't want to be bottom of the totem pole. I mean, nobody wants that for themselves, unfortunately, so… You know, you kind of just had to see where did you kind of see yourself. We had, like, our top-tier ones, like, our middle ground, and then, like, our bottom. And I've sat in the middle. And honestly, I'm fine with that.

Riley also detailed the differences between top houses and bottom houses by saying, "some of the houses that were considered lower-tier houses… would be so much more diverse. There was more gay girls, there was more black girls, there was more Asians… there was more everything" and that the top houses were, "the oldest sororities with the most money and the nicest houses, they have mostly blonde hair, blue-eyed girls, and if not, some houses are mostly the brunette, white girls, but like… those are your two options." Generally, for these participants, the bottom houses were more diverse in terms of weight, sexuality, and sometimes race, although even the most diverse sororities were still predominantly white, while the top houses were less diverse, with a majority of their members being white, skinny, blonde or brunette, traditionally feminine, and publicly identifying as straight, even if they were not.

Both bottom houses and top houses were expected to conform to group norms, but the ways those group norms influenced participants' communication differed depending on their ranking. Zoe said that being in a bottom house put her and her fellow sorority members in "a

unique situation where, like, it's not… a huge deal… if you're out, like, being gay… Nobody really is that concerned." Alternatively, Victoria, who was in a top house, had to strategically avoid communicating her LGBTQ+ identity to others so that she could fit in. She explained her struggles by saying,

> I never stopped thinking about my identity. If I was having a conversation with someone who was in the sorority outside of an event, or just running into them, I always thought about it. It was always in the back of my mind. How can I act to not give away that I'm gay, or what if they do know, and like… they can spot that I'm overcompensating. And so, it was always, like, trying to balance that in my head of, like, how can I play this right?

Lena, who was also in a top house and secretly dating one of her sorority members, experienced similar issues as Victoria. She described having to constantly manage the way she communicated in terms of having to avoid talking about LGBTQ+ topics, getting too close to her girlfriend, and more because, as she said, "if it had gotten out that [my girlfriend] and I were dating, we would have been social pariahs, so genuinely, it's not an exaggeration, it would have spread like wildfire, and that was just such a fear for me." Overall, while the effects varied, the importance of a sorority's social ranking was repeatedly mentioned. Not all sororities had the formal language of "top house" and "bottom house", but they did categorize themselves based on how accepting their sororities were for those with non-dominant identities.

Levels of Diversity and Inclusiveness. There were varied levels of diversity and inclusiveness across the participants' sororities. Typically, the more diverse and inclusive sororities were bottom houses, and if they were not, that was because their university did not use the terms "top house" and "bottom house" to rank sororities. Sophia, who was in a diverse and inclusive sorority known for being the gay sorority because the majority of their members were openly a part of the LGBTQ+ community, talked about how the diversity within her sorority positively affected the ways members communicated and said,

> I think having a diverse group always makes spaces more… even though you're different, it makes the space more inclusive, because you're able to have conversations from different perspectives… I remember talking to one of the freshmen who was very straight presenting girl, and would like, tell us all about the drama of the men's hockey team, because, like, that was kind of her perspective, and like, what she was doing on campus, or like, what party she was going to, which, like, really differed from the parties that some of the other girls would go to. And we have this space to kind of reconvene and, like, share experiences. And I remember that being a very like fun, like open space, it was very non-judgmental, like nobody would be like, Oh, you were partying with these people, like you rascal… It was very open. And, yeah, it was a good place to like share. And I think the diversity helped, because then you were able to share, like, your own perspective, and everybody was interested in everybody else's perspective, which I think is a good thing.

While there were other diverse and inclusive sororities, many of them struggled to be as inclusive in communication as Sophia's. For instance, Sue, who was in a bottom house known as the "small, gay, fat chapter," and identified her sorority as being "the land of misfit toys," talked about how in her sorority there was "room for everyone" and they were able to talk about politics, sexuality, gender, and race. However, they struggled to talk about mental illness, neurodivergence, assault, and trauma. Sue explained this issue by saying,

> If you're talking about a girl you like, or a girl you're attracted to, or someone in another chapter said something crappy to you about your race, then your sisters can rally around you and be like, yeah, that person sucks, or… Yeah… that girl's hot, I agree with you, but if it's about something that's only happened to you, you already feel isolated, then people are awkward, they don't know what to do about it.

Sue's response shows that if the experiences one has related to their identities, whether that means their race, sexuality, mental health, being someone who has experienced assault, or anything else, are not experiences that can be commonly shared and understood by the rest of the social group, it is harder to connect and communicate about different identities.

This sentiment remained true for those in less diverse and inclusive sororities, such as Alex. Alex explained how even though her sorority rarely directly said that members had to conform, she still avoided communicating any identity that was different from what was typical

for her sorority because she did not want to be different from the group norm. She detailed this point by saying,

> We all want to fit. We all want to belong. So it's kind of like, where is the boundary of that, versus like… the sorority and the communications within that? Because… outside of recruitment, really, nobody was like, 'This is what you have to wear.' 'This is what you have to do.' It was just, it was more of like, 'Hey, what are you wearing?' Like, because it was that insecurity within right? It was that like, Oh, I see the girls from [a different sorority], all looking like this. So I want to make sure we all look like this, and I'm part of that group, like, I don't want to be the only one in my sorority that doesn't look… like this… Like, I remember there was one girl that I was talking with one time where she was wearing one of our shirts, I think it was like, my junior year, and one of the other girls came up and was like, 'Who are you?' And she was like, 'Oh, I'm Sarah'. And she was like, 'Why are you wearing our shirt?' And she was like, 'Oh, like, I was inducted in… whatever'. And she was like, 'I've never seen you before'. And to me, that was like, terrifying, because I was like, I would hate to not be recognized by my own sorority… and to have that be like, something very public, like, would have been terrifying to me.

To make sure she was recognizable as an in-group member, Alex did various things, such as dying her hair, wearing certain outfits based on what other sorority members were wearing, not identifying publicly as LGBTQ+, and even not publicly enjoying LGBTQ+ media in her pursuit to portray a cohesive social identity that fit within her sorority's group norms. Since her sorority was not diverse, she was more limited in the ways that she could communicate her identity to others while still fitting in. Altogether, while the degrees to which their sororities were diverse and inclusive varied, the stories from Sophia, Sue, and Alex show how the sororities' social identities largely influenced the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members communicated with other members. The more diverse and inclusive the sorority was, the more options participants had for communicating their identities while still fitting into group norms.

Varying Stereotypes Within the Sorority. While participants described each sorority having their own stereotypes, their sororities were not always limited to one stereotype. The stereotypes, or group norms, within a sorority could have static and fluid variations. Those with static group norm variations described their sorority as having two different types of members.

Victoria provided one example of this by describing how in her sorority, “you had to either be hyper-fem or… there had to be a reason why you weren't. Either you were in athletics, or you were, like, a farm girl tomboy, like, there had to be a reason why.” For her sorority, there were multiple ways to fit in, but the expectations for fitting in were still dependent on cisheteronormativity, as the reason why you were not hyper-fem like the other girls could not be because you were LGBTQ+. Since Victoria was not in athletics or a farm girl tomboy, and she wanted to fit in, she had limited options for communicating her identity through her clothing. Another example of static variations can be seen with Zoe. Zoe described how there were two types of members in her sorority that differed in how they responded to being in a bottom house. She explained,

> The first archetype is, like, myself and most of my friends who rush [our sorority] because they liked [our sorority] because it's diverse, because they felt like they could be themselves. These people might be people of color, um, queer women, like… all of the above, and tend to be super involved. The second archetype are… women who went through formal recruitment, and [our sorority] was their last choice, but they got dropped from every other house. And so they're kind of stuck here.

For Zoe’s sorority, members who were in the first archetype, like herself, were involved and communicated openly about their various identities. Those in the second archetype had the same freedoms to communicate openly about their identities with others, but chose to communicate less with other members and be less involved because they felt “animosity” that those in the first archetype did not communicate their identities in ways that fit their expectations for how sororities should present themselves (i.e., because their sorority did not communicate identity in the same ways that top houses did, and instead communicated in ways that portrayed diverse group norms). For these individuals in sororities with static variations, the differences remained steady.

In contrast, those in sororities with fluid variations in stereotypes described how their sorority had one set of group norms for all members that changed over time. These changes occurred in response to houses changing from top houses to bottom houses or from trying to change from bottom houses to top houses. Sue was one of the individuals who was in a bottom house that used to be a top house. She explained how she discovered the change in status and the ways it affected communication by saying,

> We learned eventually that it had been… within, like, the last… 3 to 5 years the chapter had gotten quite small, like it used to be a top house and, like, you know, consistently had parties with, like, fraternities and things like that, and then… Um, for whatever reason, that we still don't understand to this day, it got small. But none of us cared. But it really affected the way that upperclassmen interacted with us.

Specifically, the upperclassmen would tell the younger members that they could not attend philanthropy events about food or eat in public because they were upset that their sorority had gone from a top house to a bottom house that was known for having fat and gay members. While these changes made it harder for upperclassmen to communicate with newer members, it strengthened bonds between new members as they were able to openly communicate about their identities related to their weight, sexuality, race, and more.

Inverse effects were seen with sororities that started off as bottom houses but were attempting to become top houses. Olivia was one of the participants in this type of sorority. In her experience, she first joined the sorority because it was inclusive and she was able to make close, like-minded friends. However, things quickly changed as the sorority became more religious and developed stricter expectations for identity communication in hopes that they could change their stereotype on campus. She said, “there wasn’t a whole lot of focus on… sisterhood… the whole focus while I was there was about rising up the ranks as a sorority.” As these changes happened, Olivia had several negative encounters communicating with members,

including being told she was dressed like a "slut" at a date party (i.e., party where members bring a plus-one, typically a man they are dating or a platonic friend).

In response, she "started dressing differently, like how they wanted." Yet, despite her efforts, she was not able to conform enough. Things came to a head during an election meeting where other members decided she should not be reelected for her leadership position after particular members shared a pros and cons list about her, where they did not just mention her work as a leadership member, but her sexuality and weight. In doing this, they not only shamed her but also outed her (i.e., publicly told others about her LGBTQ+ identity without her consent). Afterwards, Olivia found out what was said about her, decided to move out of the sorority house, leave the sorority, and explained that "it was like the Salem Witch Trials" as she had to get lawyers involved to be able to leave without being fined. In the end, no matter how hard she tried to fit the new group norms, Olivia's communication was strained with many of the other members who were able to and chose to conform, as she was not able to effectively hide her non-dominant identities related to her weight and sexuality. Altogether, these stories highlight the fact that while sororities are not confined to one set of group norms, the various group norms they have do still inform the communication choices LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members make when communicating with other members.

Structural Forces

There were structural forces related to identity that impacted the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members communicated with other members (RQ1), including the inherent exclusivity of sororities, the ways leadership was structured, the public or private contexts in which communication took place within the sorority, and the connections sororities had with fraternities. While these factors themselves are not identities, they did inform the ways certain

individuals felt that they could or could not communicate within sororities based on their identities, and therefore, are important to consider when looking at the ways different aspects of identity shape LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other sorority members.

The Exclusivity of Panhellenic Sororities. In this study, participants had many positive experiences. However, for most of the participants, there was an undeniable fact that Panhellenic sororities were known for being exclusive, and this stereotype did not appear out of nowhere. As participants explained, Panhellenic sororities are exclusive by design due to their roots and because only certain individuals can join, depending on whether they are picked by Panhellenic sororities to join and if they can afford the fees associated with being in a Panhellenic sorority. While Panhellenic sororities have become more inclusive than they were in the past, they are still built on a foundation of discrimination, which continues to be recognized by members. As Victoria said, sororities come with a "certain privilege and racist history and homophobic history." This history has led to Panhellenic sororities commonly perpetuating cisheteronormative, Christian, classist, racist, and other exclusionary expectations based on identity. Willow was one of the participants who spoke about these issues by discussing how the structure made it hard to humanize people and the experiences they had within sororities. She gave a personal example of how she would be punished for missing meetings to attend religious events by losing attendance points (which are needed to participate in sorority activities and avoid fines) because she was Jewish, and only Christian holidays were considered when scheduling meetings. She explained this further by saying,

> I would have attendance points taken off, and I'm like, well, if it was Christmas break, no one would be questioning it. I'm sorry I don't have the same schedule as you. And so, like I said… these individual little circumstances where we're just playing by a book and

> we're not humanizing people, I think was the biggest issue that I personally saw in terms of representing your identity and feeling comfortable within it in that space.

For Willow and others who had non-dominant identities, their identities were not taken into consideration when Panhellenic sorority structures and rules were being developed, which made things harder for them. They had to either communicate more to explain and rationalize their identities to others who fit the group norms, try to communicate in ways that fit the group norms, or accept that they were always going to struggle due to the structure of the sorority. Even in Panhellenic sororities that were more accepting, there was still the structural barrier of the financial costs of being a sorority member. As Zoe said, "You can be lenient in other places, but there's still that exclusivity aspect because you have to pay a certain amount of money, and if you don't have that money… you can't show up. You can't be in it." Beck was one of the participants affected by this structural issue, as they struggled to connect with other sorority members due to their differences in class privilege. Beck detailed their struggles by sharing,

> It just kind of felt like there was always, like, a barrier between a lot of the upperclassmen and me, because, like, we probably don't have a lot in common… like, I was working class. I don't think they can necessarily tell that. But, like, it is different when there's like, a girl that comes from money and a girl that, like, really doesn't. And so there were a lot of like contradictions in that manner, of like people complaining that their parents wouldn't buy them like a new Kendra Scott necklace and that they were upset about that when it's like, I'm trying to afford my textbooks.

For these members, being in a sorority was a fundamentally privileged experience, and the degree to which they had access to various privileges related to their identities impacted the ways they were able to communicate and connect with others in their sororities.

Structure of Leadership. Panhellenic sororities were described as having various levels of leadership, ranging from the national level (e.g., the National Panhellenic Conference, each sorority's national headquarters, etc.), to local levels (e.g., alumnae ran advisory boards, college campuses' Panhellenic councils, etc.), to chapter levels (e.g., executive board, committees, and

chairs). These multiple levels of leadership contributed to the rules, regulations, and group norms sororities had in varying ways. While the structure of leadership was not a part of the original interview questions, it was commonly discussed by many of the participants in terms of how it impacted those in and outside of leadership positions in various ways, such as how members were able to and chose to communicate with one another.

Leadership Structures Influencing Sorority Members. Direct influence from national levels of leadership was rare, but it was seen with individuals like Sue, a member of a more diverse and inclusive sorority that was considered a bottom house, who described how leadership members from the NPC would regularly check in to see if their numbers, recruitment practices, and sorority events aligned with their organizational identity. In response, Sue and the other members of her sorority had to try to communicate their sorority's social group identity in ways that aligned with Panhellenic's social group identity so that they could meet expectations. Additionally, influences on the local level were more common than those on the national level, but still not as prevalent as those on the chapter level. Still, some participants described how leadership members on the local level could inform their communicative choices in their sororities. Amelia, who was in a more diverse and inclusive sorority, discussed how one of the reasons she felt comfortable openly communicating about her LGBTQ+ identity in her sorority was because there was once a Panhellenic float in her city's local pride parade.

Alternatively, Olivia, who was in a less diverse and inclusive sorority, described that one of the reasons she felt uncomfortable openly communicating about her LGBTQ+ identity in her sorority was that local advisors would use meetings to share restrictive expectations for their sorority. Olivia described one particular meeting by saying, "I remember the advisor, who's a grown woman, talking to us was about how to present ourselves so that we had more sex appeal

to the frat guys." This advisor had the power to enforce their cisheteronormative expectations in ways that influenced how members communicated their group identity (e.g., wearing more makeup and feminine clothing) and led to Olivia feeling unable to authentically be herself or communicate about her sexuality.

Continuing, the leadership structure on the chapter level was the most impactful for sororities. Examples of tasks leadership members would be responsible for included mediating conflict between members, helping new members when they joined the sorority, coordinating recruitment, managing what members posted on social media, educating members on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), planning events, and more. Some participants communicated distrust of leadership members, such as Riley, who referred to them as "cops" and discussed how she would not reveal information to them for fear that it would "be used against [her]", while others discussed the effects of leadership on their sorority more neutrally. It seemed that the perceptions people had of their chapter's leadership members depended on how far they deviated from their sorority's group norms, with those who deviated the most experiencing the greatest impact in ways that made them distrustful and avoid communicating with leadership members in their sorority. Similar effects were also seen on the local and national levels of leadership structure, as those who mentioned the impact of leadership members were typically those who felt like they were being regulated by those in leadership positions. Typically, participants who did not discuss having issues with any of the leadership structures were individuals who felt they fit in with their sorority's group norms, and therefore, did not have to worry about being governed in negative ways.

Leadership Structures Influencing Leadership Members. As previously mentioned, participants were not directly asked about their leadership experiences, but about a third of the

individuals interviewed mentioned having one or more leadership positions in multiple levels of Panhellenic's leadership structure. Being in a leadership position came with increased visibility and expectations as they were expected to represent their sorority well. Those in leadership positions could face judgments from their sororities, local leadership members, and national leadership members. Willow was one of the participants who held leadership positions in her sorority. She talked about having to manage a couple of instances of conflict where she thought LGBTQ+ sorority members might have been wrongfully reported for doing things other non-LGBTQ+ members did regularly (e.g., going to parties and dancing on other members or playing drinking games where people strip) and struggling with trying to use her power for good while still meeting the expectations of her local advisors. As she explained, "I wanted my best to try and make people feel welcome, but at the same time, it's very difficult to do when you have advisors, past executive board, and people breathing down your neck." Even in instances where she felt like LGBTQ+ members were being possibly targeted, she still had to directly address the issues and communicate in ways that aligned with her advisors' expectations because if she did not, she would "get in trouble."

Another individual who faced problems due to expectations that came with being in a leadership position was Sue, who felt that she could not be honest about her mental health struggles with other sorority members due to her leadership roles. She explained,

> I think that… power dynamic really influences the conversations more than, like, identity, because they all knew that I had… I have, um… an anxiety diagnosis, I always have. Um, they all knew that. We're all very open about anxiety and depression and stuff like that, but to be confronted with it, an acute case of it, everyone's kind of immobilized, especially if you were an authority figure.

Talking about mental health was a tough topic to talk about for any of the members, but it was especially difficult for her since she was in a leadership position. Both Sue's and Willow's

responses show how being a leadership member could make it harder to communicate with other sorority members.

In contrast, there were also more neutral effects of being in a leadership role that some of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic members discussed. For example, some individuals discussed how they would alter their communication when they were representing their sorority because they wanted to be professional. Nina was one of these individuals and shared her thought process by saying,

> I'm pretty big on boundaries, so like… when it came to actual, like, sorority functions… I kind of treated it like a job, like, I tried to be more professional about it and, like, have boundaries, but then… if it's a one-on-one hangout, then… it was, like, a little bit of a different Nina… I wear hats. I take them on and off.

The ways Nina communicated with other sorority members depended on the setting she was in, as her identity as a leadership member led her to want to present herself more professionally when she was acting as a leader at events, compared to being a different, more casual version of herself when individually interacting with other sorority members. Regardless of the effects, those in leadership positions all discussed how being a part of the leadership structure was a factor they took into consideration when deciding how to communicate with other members.

Private Versus Public Influences. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members spoke about the ways being in public or private settings influenced how they communicated and what they communicated about with other sorority members. When they were in public settings, they had to be a lot more careful with what they shared and how they communicated their identities compared to when they were in private settings. These effects were not always specific to their sorority. Kate was one of the individuals who felt that being in a public or private setting informed her communication with other members and explained,

> I think part of that came down to, like, not like the schools' expectation… but just, like… the nature of, like, being in private with people meant, like, we were in smaller groups, and usually that meant I was just, like, more comfortable to, like, be around people and not feel, like, on all the time.

For her, the effects of being in public or private settings existed in and outside of the sorority. However, many other members stated that while these effects may exist everywhere, they were amplified due to the ways sororities were structured. Specifically, the factors of surveillance from their sorority and living in or out of their sorority house contributed to why LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members felt that they had to make strategic choices about how they communicated publicly versus privately.

Feeling Under Surveillance. A commonly discussed reason for LGBTQ+ sorority members feeling like they had to be careful about how they communicated was the surveillance that came with being in a sorority. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were regularly surrounded by or at least near other sorority members, which meant they could often be in situations where other sorority members could see and perceive them. Alex explained this and said,

> I don't think there was ever a class my entire time that I didn't take with somebody in my sorority, so I was always around somebody. I was always like, eating lunch in the union with somebody. I lived with people in my sorority, I think, three out of my four years in the sorority, and then I lived in the house for one year or one semester… So I was always around it.

The tight-knit community of her sorority came with the effect of feeling like she could always be watched, unless she was off-campus and individually hanging out with specific sorority members she trusted. For some, these feelings of surveillance did not matter much. Yet for others, particularly those in sororities with stricter group norms, feelings of surveillance were more negatively impactful. These difficulties were made worse as members commonly displayed their letters (i.e., their sorority's logo) via their apparel and cars, which made them more identifiable

for those in and outside of their sororities. Alex, who was in a sorority with less inclusive group norms and already felt monitored on campus, also had to worry about others being able to recognize her car when she drove around due to her displaying her sorority's letters on her car, which made it harder for her to explore as she was trying to figure out her LGBTQ+ identity.

Other members also discussed how the identifiability of their letters impacted them, particularly when they were wearing clothing with their letters, because of the common expectation for members to be especially careful with how they communicated their identities when in their letters. Olivia was one of the participants who talked about this expectation and said,

> If you're in your letters, then you have to have… you know, full beat, hair done, and it was very… not my vibe… I had to start trying to fit in the little cookie-cutter, you know, and… it wasn't me, and I didn't like that I had to… had to be like that.

When sorority members wore their letters, they were seen as representing their sorority, and that representation came with expectations that they would communicate their identities in ways that aligned with their sorority, which, for Olivia and many of the other participants, meant having their makeup and hair done.

Those in less diverse and inclusive sororities faced the possibility of being punished if they did not conform publicly. Punishment could look like being reported, called into a meeting with the leadership team, receiving negative marks that can add up and lead to fines or not being able to participate in sorority events, being socially outcast, and/ or more. In some instances, the possible punishments would be directly communicated, especially if individuals were breaking more formally communicated rules (e.g., a member receiving a negative mark because they posted themselves drinking after their sorority told them sharing posts with alcohol was prohibited). In other cases, particularly those involving more informal rules based on group

norms (e.g., expectations not to look promiscuous or publicly identify as LGBTQ+), the punishment was more abstract, which could make it even more frightening. Audrey explained how abstract surveillance from sororities, and Greek life organizations in general, caused members to want to conform,

> Enforcement-wise, it's just… the big 'they'… like, it's just this invisible 'they' that's gonna come punish you with some horrible punishment that only your brain knows and is making you afraid of. And I think in a lot of ways, this is how frats control the boys, too, because they just mindfuck them into being afraid.

Audrey's response shows that even if no one was physically watching, manufactured feelings of being surveilled could regulate how sorority members communicated. While not everyone experienced these negative feelings of surveillance, those who did were extremely cautious and aware of how they communicated in public versus private settings.

Living in House Versus Out of House. Many of the participants talked about how living in their sorority house or not living in their sorority house altered how they were able and chose to communicate with other sorority members. Those who did not live in their sorority house commonly found it harder to communicate with and feel connected to other sorority members than those who lived in their sorority house. However, not living in house also gave them a break from the surveillance and regulation of the sorority as their home was fully private. Comparatively, those who lived in their sorority house had limited opportunities for privacy. Lena, who had moved out of her sorority house, compared the experiences of living out of her sorority house versus in it and said,

> It was so, so much better not constantly feeling like being surveilled. I can go back to that feeling, I can tap into it, and it's just awful. It is just, like… I'd never want that ever again because, I mean… our rooms were small, they were all right next to each other, the walls were paper-thin, the doors, I mean, they locked… You could lock them from the inside, but, like, you didn't have a key to your room. Like, it didn't lock on the outside… and there was also just this, like, expectation, you could go into anybody's room at any time.

The ability and expectation for anyone to be able to go into anyone's room at any time increased feelings of surveillance and minimized one's availability of private settings. Lena's description shows how living in a sorority house limited the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could communicate privately, as even their rooms were not well protected against the possibility of being heard or having people come in uninvited. Not everyone minded this limitation of privacy, but those who did struggled because they could rarely get a break from feeling perceived and judged by their other sorority members and having to be conscious about how, what, and with whom they communicated.

Fraternity Connections. Despite there not being any direct questions in the interview protocol about fraternities, the influence of fraternities on sororities repeatedly came up. The sororities LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were in often had social connections with fraternities on campus. There were varying degrees to which sororities were involved with fraternities on their campuses, but most of the participants shared that their association with fraternities negatively influenced their sororities' group norms. The connections sororities had with fraternities could manifest in multiple ways. For example, sororities commonly cohosted and/ or attended fraternity events. At these events, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members not only had to consider how their fellow sorority members would react to the different ways they would communicate their identities, but also the fraternity members. Lily was one of the individuals who shared that one of the reasons she was not public about her LGBTQ+ identity in her sorority was because of the types of fraternity environments she was regularly put in due to her sorority's connection with fraternities on campus. She said, "They try to kind of pair us, especially for, like, homecoming… and then you're, like, in their environments, and they're just, like… terrible, obviously… just, like, homophobic and calling people slurs, and… all that kind

of fun stuff." The fraternity Lily's sorority was paired with for social events was homophobic, which further contributed to her decision not to be public about her LGBTQ+ identity in her already non-diverse or inclusive sorority, and showed how the culture of fraternities can also affect sororities.

One of the reasons many of the sororities were so connected to fraternities was because of the cisheteronormative culture of their sororities. This cisheteronormative culture was often seen as an extension of the cisheteronormative culture of society at large, which was compounded due to the direct connections sororities had with fraternities. Willow was one of the individuals who felt this way and said that while she could talk to her sorority members about her romantic and/ or sexual experiences with men, she did not feel comfortable talking to her sorority members about her romantic and/ or sexual experiences with women. She explained,

> I feel like we live in such a heteronormative society… especially being in Greek life… We're always partying with, like, the other frat boys, and everyone wants to talk about their crazy night with Joe, or Tate, or whatever their name is. And then I am sitting here and want to tell people about maybe my fun experience, or like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe that this happened,' but… I don't know how that's going to be received.

For Willow and others like her, the way her sorority was connected to fraternities amplified the cisheteronormativity that was already common societally and contributed to her feeling like she could not communicate with other sorority members about her romantic and/ or sexual experiences with women.

Another example of the influence of fraternities can be seen in how they were often responsible for the designation of house ranking (i.e., if a sorority was a top house or bottom house). Fraternity members would commonly make jokes about sororities, such as coming up with insulting puns based on sororities' names and their stereotypes, which helped solidify the sorority's identity on campus. As a result of this judgment from fraternities, some sororities

expected their members to appeal to fraternity members to improve or maintain their social ranking, while others ignored their input. The ways in which sororities responded to these judgments impacted the influence they had on how sorority members communicated. As previously mentioned, not all Panhellenic sororities valued the opinions of fraternities, and some participants did not mention fraternities or rejected the idea that Panhellenic sororities had to appeal to fraternities.

LGBTQ+ Sorority Members' Communication Management Strategies

Utilizing Communication to Fit in with Group Norms

As previously discussed, the diversity and inclusiveness of sororities varied throughout the participants' experiences. Their placement on the varied spectrum of openness of their group norms informed the ways they managed communicating their multiple, intersecting identities to fit into such group norms, which helped answer RQ2. The group norms for participants' sororities could be categorized into three groups: open, mostly open with some limitations, and closed. Important to note is that these group norms could be viewed as positive, neutral, and negative, as their perceived valence varied depending on the sorority, group norm, and individual experiencing them.

Conforming to Open Group Norms. It was rare that sororities' group norms were completely open, but it was seen with some of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' sororities. Often, the sororities with open group norms were the ones that were diverse and inclusive. *Open group norms* were those that had no limitations on the ways members could communicate. Kate was one of the individuals who spoke about the ways open group norms allowed her to explore her identity and communicate authentically with her sorority members. She explained,

> I think there's a moment in every queer person's life where they're like, I'm gonna dress the opposite of how I think I want to dress. Because I have to, like, figure out where on, like, my sort of, like, uh, like, clothing expression spectrum I want to be… but it didn't feel outside of the realm… of what anybody… was wearing. Like, I just kind of, like, was… putting on flannels for the first time, because I wasn't worried about looking gay, because I was like, I am gay. Um, and… I think, like… I don't think that there was any… I wasn't ever really worried about, like, how my sorority members, like, my sisters would react to that. Um, I think it was… I guess I wasn't worried anymore about them than I was about anybody else seeing me.

Due to the openness of her sorority's group norms, Kate was able to fit in and not feel limited in the ways she could express her identities as an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member. She was able to play with fashion and wear flannels, an item of clothing that multiple of the participants mentioned being associated with queer women. While it might seem like a simple thing to be able to wear a flannel, as an LGBTQ+ woman, it was an act of resisting societal norms for sexuality and gender expression that she felt safe to do in her sorority. Kate further explained the importance of being able to wear a flannel by saying,

> I mean, there were definitely… people that were, like, wearing flannels. We were also in the Midwest, so that's, like, common wear, I guess. But it felt so serious to me at the time to be like, and I'm gonna buy a flannel from American Eagle now, and, like, wear that. Um, and, like, Henleys, and, like, all these things that, like, are incorporated in my wardrobe now, but, like, felt so, like, stark. at the time… There were some sororities that… would be, like, in skirts, and in whatever, like, all the time.

Kate's response shows how what might seem like little things to non-LGBTQ+ people can be major considerations for LGBTQ+ people who often feel the need to consciously manage the ways they communicate their identities to others, especially in places that are typically considered hegemonically gendered spaces, like sororities. Amelia was another participant whose sorority had some open group norms, and she described the impact of them on her identity communication by saying, "I think it just helped me feel, like, affirmed and, like, being close to who I was." For Amelia, Kate, and others with open group norms, the fluidity in expectations

allowed them to explore different ways of communicating their identities, genuinely be themselves, and still fit group norms.

Conforming to Mostly Open Group Norms with Some Limitations. Typically, even the diverse and inclusive sororities still had *group norms with some limitations* for identity communication. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members with these group norms could communicate some aspects of their identities but struggled with communicating about others. These types of dynamics were partially explored previously when discussing other influential social identities outside of being LGBTQ+. Continuing with these types of communicative patterns, in terms of sexuality, there were sororities where LGBTQ+ members could join, but it was not common to openly discuss their sexualities within the sororities. Zoe described how group norms affected the ways she communicated about identity with other members by saying, "I feel like that… unfortunately, that communication just doesn't exist… even having, like, conversations about identity… I don't really think that is, like, something that I've experienced." Even though Zoe was open about her sexuality and was in a diverse and inclusive sorority known for being accepting of LGBTQ+ people, she still did not have experiences communicating about identity with other members.

Beck was another member who experienced mostly open group norms with some limitations. In their sorority, there was room for diversity and inclusivity in various ways. However, the majority of the members were traditionally feminine, so it became a group norm for members to communicate traditionally feminine gender identities, especially for sorority events. For Beck, a nonbinary and autistic individual, these group norms influenced the ways they were able to communicate as they were experimenting and trying to understand and communicate their identities. Beck described these influences by saying,

> You're expected to please people… during rush, basically, to wear the best outfits you have… and they're like we need you to look as pretty as possible, wear your best makeup, be uncomfortable. It doesn't matter because you need to make a good impression. And I didn't appreciate that, because, like, I need to be comfortable in everything that I wear, or else I have a meltdown. So it was hard to struggle through that… like, it was on several occasions that, like, you need to wear a dress and heels, and that's the only option you have, and that was kind of like, disappointing, and I don't know, challenging sometimes, because, like, I was still figuring out, like, my femininity. And I think that this did give me, like, a good place to experiment with, like, not even like, like hyper femininity even, but like, what would it look like if I was like, a girly girl… I don't know. It's kind of like that balance of… what is femininity for myself, versus like, presenting for these other women who were, you know, presenting for this, like, for this, like, patriarchal worldview... So it was kind of like… I was playing around with this… container of, like, femininity.

In Beck's experience, the expectations to be feminine only existed at particular times, like during rush, where cisheteronormative expectations took over the typical, more fluid, group norms for gender identity communication. Beck struggled trying to fit into these norms as they were, at the time, unsure of their gender identity, and struggled with wearing things that made them uncomfortable as an autistic individual. There were times when they were able to communicate their identity in such a way as to fit group norms and still be themselves, but there were also instances when they felt the need to alter their identity communication to fit the sorority's group norms at the expense of being able to openly communicate their identity as a nonbinary and autistic individual. The experience of having group norms specific to certain sorority events, like rush, was common and showed how even mostly open group norms could still have some limitations that informed the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members communicated their identities.

Conforming to Closed Group Norms. Many of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had *closed group norms,* especially those in sororities that were not diverse and inclusive. These closed group norms typically encouraged LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to communicate their identities in ways that conformed to the rest of the social group.

The management strategies LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members used to conform to closed group norms often involved altering their physical appearance to match the rest of the social group. Alex was one of the individuals and detailed her experience by saying,

> It's not a whole lot of expression within yourself. The biggest thing that I can remember was when I was recruited, I had pink stripes in my hair. And I remember at sisterhood day [one of the final stages of sorority recruitment], they asked me, "if we, you know, pref [choose], you, will you dye your hair to get rid of the pink?" And I was like, I didn't know how to take that. And I was like, "yes," I want to… be in here, more than I want the pink in my hair.

Alex was willing to change parts of herself because, at the time, it was more important for her to communicate her future identity as a sorority member than it was other aspects of her identities. Once she was accepted into the sorority, she got rid of her pink stripes and continued to communicate her identity in a way that conformed to the closed group norms.

Another instance of someone managing their identity communication to fit the closed group norms was seen with Victoria, who would conform at certain times, so that she could resist at other points. She said,

> I almost felt like sometimes I would give myself, like, passes of, I dressed super feminine this one time, I wore a dress this one time… so that would give me cred to be able to wear what I really wanted to wear normally.

Victoria felt she had to earn opportunities to communicate in ways that resisted group norms by conforming. Even though she was able to do this, and sometimes dress in ways that aligned with how she wanted to present herself, the majority of the time she still altered her appearance so that she could communicate her identity in ways that conformed to the closed group norms. As she said,

> It would always be altering what I was doing, what I was wearing, and… yeah, especially, like, the haircuts I was getting, how I was dressing on a daily basis, especially when living in the house, when you can't go anywhere where someone isn't perceiving you, just constantly feeling like you have to, like, play it up to match their energy.

As seen with Victoria, for many of those in sororities with closed group norms, it was important for them to communicate their identities in ways that conformed to the group norms so that they could fit in.

Conforming to Closed Group Norms to Solidify Social Identity. For many of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, communication was not just a useful tool for fitting in, but also a tool they could use to solidify their social identity within the group. Specifically, for those in less diverse and inclusive sororities with closed group norms, they communicated in such a way that they would fit their sorority's closed group norms to prevent or manage feeling like an outsider, often in terms of their LGBTQ+ identity. These individuals wanted to be a part of their sorority's social group, so they would regularly hide their LGBTQ+ identities and perform heterosexual identities. Lola was one of the individuals who did this and said,

> I think I probably tried to fit in a little bit in the sorority and, like, not… really bring up that side if I did have to talk to some of the girls that I wasn't as close with… at events or things like that.

For Lola, there were few instances in which she would discuss her LGBTQ+ identity with others in her sorority, as having an LGBTQ+ identity would make her an outsider in her less inclusive sorority. She would only communicate her LGBTQ+ identity with a couple of her closest friends, in private, when she was separated from the social group of the sorority. When she was with the rest of her sorority members, she wanted to fit in and be a part of the social group, so she avoided communicating about her LGBTQ+ identity.

Audrey was another member who communicated her identity in ways that fit her sorority's group norms to avoid feeling like an outsider in her sorority. At the time, she did not realize she was LGBTQ+, but she still felt pressured to portray a cisheteronormative identity in alignment with the rest of her sorority members. She explained,

> There's just an element of, like, social desirability there… like… I want them to see me as somebody who is interesting to talk to and, like, and is not a weirdo… I don't want people to hate me, but I also don't want people to, like, really remember me. And so I've always kind of wanted to, like, blend in, but nobody's ever mean to me, they're just never have any reason to hate me, kind of a thing. And so this is where I have always tried to exist… I guess, communicatively… how I wanted them to perceive me… is I wanted them to see me as the girl who was cute and smart and precious and had leadership potential and was gonna find a cute guy at some point, and gonna have some cute wedding. Like, I just… I… tried to live that out as best as possible, and… for the most part, I did, until I didn't… have a boy at the end.

As Audrey said, it was all about blending in. Her perspective reflects a desire to replicate a traditional cisheteronormative identity that was typical for her sorority so that she could be a part of the group and have a cohesive social identity. For these LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members with closed group norms, it was important to conform so that they could fit in and solidify their social identity.

Utilizing Communication to Resist Group Norms

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were not just passive recipients of group norms. They would find ways to resist, with varying results, which reflected ways in which they managed their multiple, intersectional social identities (RQ2). For some, their resistance would have more positive effects as they were able to change group norms or at least feel less confined by them. For others, their resistance would have more negative effects, leading to them not being able to change the group norms and losing connection to their sorority. This loss of connection could have minimal effects or cause LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to leave their sororities. Regardless of the effects, it is valuable to recognize the work these LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did as they actively tried to shape their sororities' group norms through resistance.

Experiencing Positive Effects from Resisting Group Norms. Resisting group norms could lead to positive changes for the social group and for the individual doing the resisting.

Change did not come easily, though, and it was rare for one individual to be able to change the group norms of the entire group. One of the rare instances of someone being able to create change for the social group, even if it was minimal, can be seen with Lena. Lena attended an event with her sorority, where they were supposed to assist with improving various parts of the community around their campus. The task they were given was something Lena did not feel comfortable doing, and instead of conforming, she stepped up and was able to change how her sorority handled the situation. Lena tells this story by saying,

> Our sorority got assigned to a church, and we were told that we were going to do yard work. Uh, when we got there, they were actually making us throw away a homeless person's property that was, like, on the very, very edge of their property, like… tearing down this entire encampment, and throwing stuff away all the possessions this person had… and a lot of my sorority members were willing to do it. It was just… crazy to me.… Me and my girlfriend were not willing to do that… so… I told the guy who owned the church, like, 'we're not doing this, this is, like, not what we signed up for,' and this was something that kind of got me, like, a lot of attention in the moment, positive and negative, because a lot of people did feel uncomfortable with it. There were only a few who truly just… went straight to work, destroying this person's life… And so, I did get met with some opposition there, just like, mostly in the form of weird looks, or, like, people saying, like, 'I don't get why it's a big deal,' like… ignorant comments. But a lot of people actually were like, 'thank you for doing that, I didn't want to do that.' So, that was kind of, um, a positive and a negative experience… It showed me some more people who were aligned, and some people who were… Hmm, worse than I thought.

While some individuals did not like what Lena had to say, she was able to gather support and change the way her sorority handled the situation. By doing so, she used communication to shift the group norms of her sorority in ways that she was able to maintain her morals as an individual and still identify as a member of her sorority.

Riley was another individual who was able to enact positive effects with her resistance. While Riley did ultimately end up leaving her sorority and campus due to mental health issues, she was able to increase visibility for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members while she was in her sorority. After years of conforming to the group norms in a sorority where members regularly

made homophobic, or at the very least insensitive, comments and jokes related to LGBTQ+ identities (e.g., making jokes about sorority members being LGBTQ+ because they thought it was so unlikely and funny for one of their sorority members to be LGBTQ+ or making fun of other sororities by calling them anti-LGBTQ+ slurs), Riley chose to publicly identify as LGBTQ+ and bring her girlfriend to a date party. At the party, she walked straight up to her sorority's president, who was known for being "very Christian," and introduced her girlfriend as her girlfriend. She then posted online with her girlfriend, which garnered attention as 30 to 40 people privately shared her post. After that day, she continued to be open about her relationship and sexuality. She explained the effects of her open communication by saying,

> I thought I had to, like, play the game to win… to be liked by these girls… Not that I was really even… interested in being their friends, but you still have, like, a level of wanting people to like you, and, like, not be disgusted, or, like, repulsed by you. And I do think I changed some girls' minds in general, because I do think there is just, like, a lack of… representation of just, like, gay people, for some of those Christian people, like, they didn't know that, like, it can look like me, and it can be funny and silly and not as, like, scary as they… had guessed it seemed, so I felt like some of the girls that I feel like would have been pretty vocal about… not being pro-marriage equality, or thinking it's a sin or whatever, um, kind of take a step back. I do feel like I had some girls come up to me and… they're like, "oh, I think it's cool that you brought your girlfriend," and… I don't know… it was validating in that moment when I kind of had decided to be public and… not… feel like I need to perform… a specific version of me that they had seen for years… and to like, be seen as… a human, where I felt like I didn't before.

By being herself publicly and showing the other members that one of their own could be LGBTQ+, Riley disrupted the group norms and was able to change the ways some of the members thought about LGBTQ+ individuals inside and outside of the sorority. The courageous acts of these LGBTQ+ Panhellenic members highlight some of the powerful ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were able to have positive effects from utilizing communication to resist group norms.

Experiencing Negative Effects from Resisting Group Norms. Unfortunately, not all acts of resistance led to positive effects and changes in group norms. Most of the time, utilizing

communication to resist group norms led to individuals losing their sense of connection to their sorority and, in some cases, losing or leaving their sorority. While the results of these negative effects can differ, the results still show the struggles LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members can experience when trying to create change within their sorority.

Losing Connections and Staying with the Sorority. Those who communicated in ways that did not conform to their sorority's group norms faced the repercussions of being seen as different from other members, leading to negative effects for their sense of connection to their sorority. Victoria was one of the individuals who felt disconnected from her sorority after not changing her communication to conform to group norms. When Victoria first joined her sorority, the COVID-19 pandemic was taking place. During her second year in her sorority, she went to her "first truly sorority event" that was limited due to the pandemic. She decided to still wear a mask and was met with opposition. She shared her experience by saying,

> I walk in, and me and one other person were the only two wearing masks… and I kept wearing it, but just… constantly feeling like, oh my god, everyone's staring at me, they automatically know so much about my identity… not even my gay identity, but so much of who I am because of what I'm doing. And especially at this time of, like, political division… wearing a mask, in that kind of like, hyper-conservative environment… that was kind of, like, my first of, like, oh wow, this is what happens. People are almost scared to talk to you… it was a lot harder to make friends, and it was strange because even my friends, outside of my one friend who also wore a mask with me… they were like, 'Stop. Don't do that.' Like, they were educated enough to know that that's how you stop the spread of disease… but they were still like, 'You need to cut that out. Not cool.'

Despite Victoria's efforts, she was not able to get anyone besides her one friend to resist with her or even accept her resistance. Wearing a mask was seen as communicating a political message about who she was, and who she was did not fit the group norms because it was "not cool". After this event, Victoria continued to feel "a bit of a disconnect" because of her "moral differences", "ethical differences", and her" sexuality."

Willow also experienced pushback when she attempted to communicate in ways that did not conform to her sorority's group norms. Willow held a couple of leadership positions during her time in her sorority, including being the president. While she was not public about her LGBTQ+ identity except for with a few trusted sorority members, she did try to advocate for other members who publicly identified as LGBTQ+. Any time Willow had to handle an instance of conflict between sorority members that involved an LGBTQ+ member, she struggled to balance doing what she felt was right as an LGBTQ+ person and what was expected of her as an individual in a leadership position. A specific instance of this happening occurred when she had to meet with an LGBTQ+ person who had been reported for dancing inappropriately at events with other sorority members. Willow felt uncomfortable communicating about this issue because she knew the individual being accused was not dancing any differently than the other non-LGBTQ+ sorority members, so it felt targeted. She further described her difficulties by sharing,

> I knew that if it was me in that situation, I would not want to feel like I was being attacked just directly out of the fact that… I am a part of the LGBTQ+ community. But I almost felt even weirder at the fact, like I said earlier, that I know for a fact when I've gone out with some of these girls, that they dance on each other, and they have no problem. And I'm like, I'm gonna get in trouble if I don't address this, because advisors got involved with it, because people were saying, like, this felt, like, borderline, like… sexual harassment. So, I didn't have the opportunity to… completely back away and not say anything, or else many eyes would have been on me. But I did really have to stop and think about how I would handle this. Because I knew if it was me, I would probably be mortified. Because why is it okay for everyone else to do it, but not me? So, I really had to think cautiously about how I was going to approach that and… have conversations. And… and I'm sure that even though I tried my best, she knew what people were saying. She probably thought the same thing as me. 'Well, I see other people dancing on each other at parties, why is it a problem when it's me?'… Imagine coming out to your whole sorority, and all of a sudden, you have the president sitting and talking to you, saying that you're, uh, that you're sexually harassing people. And those words never came out of my mouth, but… no matter how cautiously you try to handle that, that stigma goes such a long way, and I could only do so much to prevent that sort of reaction.

Willow's situation was so complex that even when she tried to communicate in ways that resisted anti-LGBTQ+ norms in her sorority, she was still restricted by her role as sorority

president, as other sorority members and leadership figures expected her to communicate in ways that upheld their group norms. While Willow was still able to feel connected to her close friends in her sorority, she struggled to feel connected to the sorority overall. While Victoria and Willow faced different situations and used different communication tactics, they both relied on communication as they tried to manage their multiple, seemingly conflicting, social identities. These types of scenarios show how communicating in ways that resist group norms in a sorority can end with individuals feeling less connected to their sororities overall, as they struggle to communicate in ways that align with their various identities.

Losing/ Leaving the Sorority. Certain LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members experienced such negative effects on their sense of connection to their sororities that they decided to drop (the formal process of leaving a sorority). One of the participants who did this was Lily, who felt "pushed out" of her sorority due to the ways people responded to how she communicated in ways that resisted group norms regarding her leadership position and her mental health. Lily was the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) chair for her sorority. In her role, she tried to make the sorority more diverse and inclusive for members who did not fit the group norms, like her. On multiple occasions, she was reprimanded for how she communicated about conflict related to identity. She explained one of the instances by sharing,

> I gave a presentation over powerful women during Women's History Month, and I mentioned Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and at that time, I had, like, a form I had created that was, like, issues to be addressed within the chapter. It's basically, like… if someone wanted the opportunity to anonymously disclose diversity, equity, or inclusion… inclusion issues… And then after that chapter that I presented on that, I opened that form, and there was, like, 20 complaints that were, like, 'DEI chair presented on the Ruth Bader Ginsburg. And she's pro-abortion'… I was just like… I didn't tell you all to get an abortion or like, push an agenda.

Despite Lily trying to help change the sorority for the better by highlighting powerful women and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, the act of her communicating about topics that

were not seen as aligning with the group norms caused individuals to report her. Ultimately, Lily chose to leave her sorority after a final experience of being told she had to live in-house, despite providing a doctor's note explaining how detrimental it would be for her to live in that space. Overall, these experiences, as Lily said, "obviously left [her] with a negative impression" of her sorority. For Lily, the ways her sorority responded to her trying to communicate her identities as an individual who felt different from the other members and experienced mental health struggles informed her decision to sever ties with her sorority, as she could no longer gain enough meaningful value from her social identity as a sorority member.

While most of the examples of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members losing/ leaving their sorority involved one person leaving, Sue's story details how her entire sorority chapter was shut down at her university in response to them communicating a group identity that did not fit Panhellenic's national group identity for sorority members. As previously mentioned, Sue was a member of a sorority known for being the "fat, gay sorority." During her sorority's last years on campus, the members had mostly accepted the group norm assigned to them by the rest of the Greek life organizations on campus and were happy to stay authentic to themselves. However, due to their undesirable social ranking on campus, they struggled to get new members to join. They continuously fought to stay afloat by restructuring the ways they did recruitment (they stopped doing the traditional primary recruitment due to the costs and only did recruitment in the Spring, which was smaller and less expensive) and ensuring they had enough members that they could pay their membership dues and house payments. In the end, they were told by higher-up leadership officials that they had to vote to close their sorority's chapter at their university, or they would be closed forcibly. Sue shared the conversations and experiences she had related to her sorority closing and said,

> They always said, ‘It's about quality of life, we just want all of our… members to have a high quality of life, and with the size of your chapter, we just don't think you are,’ and we kept saying, 'Don't tell me how I'm feeling. I'm happy to put in the work. This house is alive and the sisterhood is alive, and you're telling me that you don't think I have a high quality of life, so you're putting us down?’… and… they would say, ‘Well, it's a financial issue.’ Our house was paid off, and our house is full every year… Our bills were always paid. Our dues were always paid, so… we have a hard time believing it was a financial issue or anything other than an appearance issue… I think… we showed very little interest in actually meeting their demands over the years. Like, they wanted us to keep putting on this sorority production for primary recruitment. And every year, we were like, ‘Hey, we're about to waste, like, $10,000 putting on this production. Could we just keep that money and have a sisterhood retreat? I guarantee we'd get more members, or we'd have the same result, because we're still not going to get a lot of members.’ And they were… they were just really obsessed with us doing the performance of what sorority has historically been.

While Sue and her sorority sisters were able to be an alumnae chapter (i.e., an organization for those who are no longer active Panhellenic sorority members, but want to stay in touch with other Panhellenic sorority members), it was hard for them to want to show up to an alumni organization after being closed. The ways higher up organizations responded to them communicating a social group identity that resisted Panhellenic’s desired social identity caused Sue and her other sorority members to lose their connection to their sorority. While their situation is a unique case, it does show the power of Panhellenic’s group norms on the individual sororities. Even if someone can communicate in ways that challenge and change their sorority’s group norms, there is still the chance that they will be forced to lose their social identity as sorority members.

Utilizing Communication to Manage Outgroup Perceptions of In-Group Identities

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were consistently in situations where they had to use communication to manage out-group perceptions of sorority members, which provided insight to answer RQ2. These scenarios would occur with LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ individuals who did not have sorority experience, but there was a special focus on managing out-group perceptions from other LGBTQ+ people as they shared the LGBTQ+ social identity with

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. LGBTQ+ people who had no sorority experience would often question, misunderstand, devalue, or feel sympathetic about their experiences, regardless of how they felt about them. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members responded to LGBTQ+ outsiders communicating their opinions by managing negative perceptions or avoiding communication about being a sorority member.

Managing Negative Perceptions. Most of the participants struggled to explain their sorority identity to other LGBTQ+ people who had negative perceptions of sororities**.** If LGBTQ+ sorority members decided or were unable to avoid communication about being a sorority member with outsider LGBTQ+ people, they had to develop communicative strategies to explain and/ or disidentify and devalue their sorority identity.

Explaining Sorority Identity. LGBTQ+ sorority members would often try to explain their sorority identity in response to misunderstandings from LGBTQ+ individuals who had no sorority experiences. Kate explained her experiences with this by saying, "I find that a lot of my queer friends who were not in Greek life in college have a lot of ideas about it, and it echoes the idea of any sort of, like, in-group, out-group dynamics." The misunderstandings from these typical in-group and out-group dynamics can sometimes lead to LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members attempting to utilize communication to provide understanding, or at least, address the misunderstandings. Zoe explained her process for disclosing her sorority identity and finding ways to communicate about it with outsider LGBTQ+ people and said,

> I have to be like, oh yeah, I'm in a sorority, and wait to see how they react, because, like, I don't want to, like, make them upset or anything… because sorority girls definitely have, like, all of the stereotypes against them. Which is very sad to me.

Despite having a mostly positive experience in her sorority that was largely diverse and inclusive, Zoe knew that others would not assume it was possible for her to have a positive experience, and she had to explain her experience and the value her sorority identity had for her.

Riley also discussed explaining her sorority experience, but her tactics differed as she agreed with a lot of the negative perceptions that outsider LGBTQ+ people had about sororities. She shared,

> When I tell them I was in a sorority, they… always are, like, truly shocked…and… I identify with their stance on, like, thinking sororities are inherently… a not-good system. And, like, it's weird because I have that belief, I agree with it, but I was part of it, and I fed into it… yeah, I was an outsider the whole time, but I… fed into the system that hurt other girls… And so I do feel like I have to explain myself and, like, always throw in that I met my two lesbian best friends from it, that we all found each other, but I do feel the need to over-explain myself when I talk about it.

Riley struggled because she understood and agreed with negative out-group perceptions from LGBTQ+ people who had no sorority experience, and she felt the need to explain to them that LGBTQ+ people do exist in Panhellenic sororities, that they can find each other, and that they get value from sharing their experiences of being LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members together. These experiences show how communication could be used to explain one's sorority social identity. However, explaining was not the only communicative strategy the participants used to manage negative perceptions.

Disidentifying/ Devaluing Sorority Identity. Individuals who either agreed with the negative out-group perceptions from non-sorority LGBTQ+ people or just struggled to explain their sorority identity would communicate in ways that disidentified them from sororities or devalued their sorority identity. Lola was one of the individuals who took a direct, devaluing approach to communicating about her sorority identity when talking with other LGBTQ+ people. She said, "I would most likely tell them that it sucks, and to never, ever think about joining there,

or supporting them… I don't have the highest opinion of it, and I don't usually talk highly of the sorority." Another way participants would disidentify or devalue their sorority identity was by joking about their sorority identity. Willow engaged in this communicative behavior after she graduated and left her sorority and shared,

> I joke about it, and like, 'Yeah, can you believe I was a sorority president?' And everyone's like, 'No. I really can't'… And so, I feel like my involvement becomes more of a joke, unless I'm talking about it in terms of, like… the fact that it gave me professional speaking experiences, leadership opportunities, and growth. But from a social aspect, I like to joke around… Like, I have the title, but if you look at people that typically say, 'I'm a sorority president,' I wouldn't say that I fit that image, in terms of my identity, in terms of the way that I dress, in terms of the way that I probably went out maybe 3 times a semester. Like, I did not fit that image whatsoever.

Willow acknowledged the ways she did not fit the stereotypical image of a sorority member, especially one who was involved enough to be a president, by using humor so that others would know that she also understands the ways her social identities as an LGBTQ+ person and a sorority member were conflicting.

A final way of disidentifying or devaluing one's sorority identity was to accept sympathy from outsider LGBTQ+ people. Olivia was one of the participants who did this, and she felt largely positive about the interactions she would have when talking to other LGBTQ+ people about her negative experiences as a sorority member. Olivia described her interactions by saying,

> When I shared my story to other LGBTQ people, I felt very supported. They were very apologetic and empathetic, and…it was incredibly freeing… not having to censor myself like I did before, and then these other people saying, like… supporting me, and… you know, being my cheerleaders, it was… it was very… that made the whole horrible experience a little bit better. um, was in that, like, oh, I can actually, like, go and… like, just be how I want, and… talk to who I want, and act how I want. It was great. like, with their support.

By choosing to leave her sorority, disidentifying from her social identity as a sorority member, and agreeing with the ways people devalued sorority identities, Olivia was able to authentically explain her experience and be herself in a way that was positive for her. Her experiences show

that having to explain one's sorority identity was not always a negative experience. It was all based on the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members felt about their sorority identity and the negative perceptions LGBTQ+ non-sorority members had about sororities.

Avoiding Communication about Sorority Identity. If LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were able to, they would sometimes avoid any communications about their sorority identity with non-sorority LGBTQ+ people. Typically, this was done to avoid upsetting those who did not like sororities or to avoid having to correct perceptions they felt were negative and incorrect. Alex was someone who avoided communicating about her sorority identity unless others brought it up because she acknowledged the darker sides of sororities and did not want to trigger anyone else. She explained,

> I will not be the person to start a conversation about it, just because I know the very harmful and very traumatic experiences that I've had through my sorority, but I also know the great experiences and… you know, the things that I would not change and I would not have without my sorority… I've worked through a lot with therapy, and I know that there's a lot of people that have not, and I don't ever want to… have somebody come into a situation where they're immediately faced with something that they are not ready to face… [so] I let them guide the conversation.

Alex's motivations for avoiding communication about her sorority identity were based on others' comfort levels. She utilized communication avoidance to manage the ways she talked about her multiple identities in response to her awareness of the negative perceptions and experiences others may have.

Alternatively, Sophia described that she avoided communicating about her sorority identity because, "Being in [LGBTQ+] spaces, it was a bit more taboo to be like, 'Oh, I'm in the sorority,' because that has the connotation of being just straight cis women, when clearly that's not the truth." Sophia continued discussing the reasons as to why she did not talk about her sorority identity and said that another reason was that it was "a traditionally feminine

organization," and with that came misogyny. In her experience, people considered sorority identities to be "bad" femininities, and for her, the connection between misogyny and homophobia was important. She shared,

> I think homophobia truly at its at its core is misogyny, because it's this fear of femininity and this fear of being seen as different, and I think if you're looking at… femininity… and saying this femininity is somehow less than, it really contributes to homophobia.

For Sophia, avoiding communication about her sorority identity was not just about avoiding disrupting group norms for her LGBTQ+ community, it was about not wanting to manage sexist out-group perceptions that bolstered homophobia and misogyny. As a woman in a traditionally feminine organization and as an LGBTQ+ person, she could not separate the ways her identities informed one another and felt that engaging in these conversations would invalidate her overall identity as an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member. Sophia's experience reflects similar issues experienced by other participants who struggled to separate their intersectional social identity as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Utilizing Communication for Queer Sorority Connections

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members also utilized communication to form queer sorority connections, which helped them manage their multiple, intersectional identities (RQ2). Every participant personally knew or heard of other LGBTQ+ people being in their sorority when they were an active member and/ or after they left. These individuals were the closest in-groups they had within their sororities. Some individuals did struggle to develop close bonds with other LGBTQ+ sorority members, especially if they were not personally public about their LGBTQ+ identity with anyone, but those who did described those bonds as being extremely important to them. Typically, the participants did not expect to meet other LGBTQ+ people in

their sororities, but many shared the serendipitous ways they found one another. Sophia shared her experience with this and said,

> I don't think I knew anything about the sororities, especially because I didn't know anyone who went to the school prior, like, in my life, I hadn't met anyone that had gone to the college that I went to, so I went in pretty blind to the process. And… I think there is something to say about some type of like queer gravity, where you all kind of meld together and meet each other. Maybe, maybe through this osmosis, this random match, this random match wasn't as random as I thought, and I was able to pick up on certain things.

Sophia continued to describe how she "subconsciously thought" her sorority was "a safer place" due to the unintentional ways she and her sorority members communicated their LGBTQ+ identities to one another during the rush process through things like their physical appearance (e.g., having short hair, wearing flannels, and other physical markers associated with LGBTQ+ women). Her experience reflects how some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members would consciously or subconsciously communicate their identities to one another through subtle physical cues only other LGBTQ+ people would recognize, so that they could find each other and connect.

Being able to connect with other LGBTQ+ members in their sorority allowed some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to communicate about topics that they did not feel comfortable communicating about with other non-LGBTQ+ sorority members. Victoria was one of the participants who talked about this, as she became friends and then formed a romantic relationship with another LGBTQ+ individual in her sorority. She explained how she was able to communicate with her girlfriend by saying,

> She was the one person that I always felt completely comfortable disclosing everything. I never felt like I had to hide any of myself in front of her or, like, perform a certain way. And… I'm not saying that's because of necessarily personal feelings, but because, like, I almost could sense… that she was gay, in a way… I kind of just kind of always felt that way. And so, whenever she did come out to me, it was pure celebration, and after that, like, I felt like we could understand each other on such a deeper level. Just because it was

> said out loud. What I had been assuming that she was, and what she had been assuming that I knew she was, she said. And so, we were able to relate on such a different level.

Victoria assumed her then friend, and later girlfriend, was LGBTQ+ before they verbally communicated about it, but being able to verbally communicate about their LGBTQ+ identities allowed them to connect on a deeper level due to their mutual understanding from having the shared social identities of being LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Lena was another individual who discussed the ways she was able to uniquely communicate about her sorority experiences with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. Lena was in a less diverse and inclusive sorority and struggled to find her place and come to terms with her LGBTQ+ identity. However, her ability to manage her struggles improved once she was able to communicate about her LGBTQ+ identity with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members she met in her sorority and another Panhellenic sorority on her campus. She explained how she would lean on her friends by sharing her experience with one of her friends,

> I felt like we were both really struggling in that… together, and… [she] already knew that she was queer, and so having those conversations with [her] as my, um, North Star was so… so helpful, and genuinely… helped my experience so much. [She] helped me realize who I was so much faster, and with such a safety net.

For Lena, being able to communicate with her friend who had more time to accept their LGBTQ+ identity allowed her to handle the hardships that came with being LGBTQ+ in a less diverse and inclusive sorority and better understand her multiple identities as an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member.

Additionally, the bonds Lena had with this friend and other LGBTQ+ sorority members allowed her to communicate about her identities as an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member in ways she was not able to with others, including other LGBTQ+ people outside of her sorority. She shared,

> I get met with a lot of, like, sympathy, from other queer… Because… the expectation in… any kind of queer community about being in a sorority is like, 'oh my god, it was awful.' And a lot of it was awful, I can't lie. But some of it was great. And so I feel like it's actually really hard to talk about it with people, specifically being queer, in a sorority, realizing I'm queer in a sorority, it's hard to talk about that with other queer people who don't have that kind of, like… cultural knowledge about what a sorority is and what that's like, um… So I really… I love talking about it with other women who were queer in a sorority, because it's just so much, ugh, so much easier. It's like… You get it… You don't have to explain as much.

While Lena appreciated the sympathy from other LGBTQ+ people, she felt like their perspective did not fully recognize her experiences, and it was hard to be able to communicate her identities as an LGBTQ+ person and sorority member at the same time without being misunderstood. Her experiences highlight how some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were able to communicate with one another so that they could fully be themselves as LGBTQ+ people and Panhellenic sorority members. Regardless of the levels of diversity and inclusion in their sororities or their LGBTQ+ communities outside of their sororities, the special bonds between LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members created spaces for unique and authentic conversations about their identities and lived experiences.

Discussion

The current study aimed to contribute to previous literature on sororities, specifically LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, and others who have multiple, intersectional, and sometimes conflicting social identities to increase understanding of their unique lived experiences and the ways that intersectional social identities can affect and be affected by communication. Participants' experiences aligned with claims made by social identity theory, specifically related to social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Additionally, the findings identified that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication was shaped by their individual identities, the social identities of their sororities,

and the structural factors of their sorority and Panhellenic sororities in general (RQ1) and how these individuals use communication to fit in with group norms, resist group norms, manage outgroup perceptions of in-group identities, and develop connections with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members (RQ2). Altogether, the findings contribute to what is known about communication and social identities and highlight how communication is the vehicle for the experiences detailed in previous literature and the importance of considering communication, social identities, and intersectionality when trying to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Social Identity Processes

The communicative processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison were identified when looking at LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. First, social categorization was seen with the informal social ranking system and rush process. With the informal social ranking system, fraternities and sororities would make jokes and comments about individual sororities that socially categorized and assigned them the labels of being top or bottom houses based on the group norms and identities of the sorority's members. As found in previous literature, top house sororities typically had more limiting group norms related to identity, and bottom house sororities were generally more diverse (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). These labels informed the types of individuals sororities looked for during rush. The sororities would socially categorize PNMs based on how well the communication of their social identities aligned with the group norms of their sorority. At the same time, the PNMs would make judgments about the identity of each sorority as a social group based on how the current members communicated their identities and decide which sorority they were the best fit

for. Then, based on a mutual selection process, a PNM could join a sorority and formally become a part of their sorority's in-group.

Once an individual became an official member, they began the process of socially identifying with their sorority and developing their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority member, or at least, they would attempt to identify with their sorority and develop their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority member. This process was particularly difficult for those who had identities that did not fit the group norms of their sorority. For example, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in more exclusive sororities struggled to authentically socially identify as a member of their sorority. Typically, these individuals were able to join their sorority because they consciously avoided communicating their LGBTQ+ identity to others during the rush process or because they were not aware of their LGBTQ+ identity until after they joined their sorority. However, despite being able to get into their sorority, they still struggled to fit in and felt the need to continue to communicate their identities in ways that conformed to their sororities' group norms in an attempt to solidify their social identities as Panhellenic sorority members.

Continuing, as found in previous research (e.g., Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Littlefield, 2016), the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in this study generally wanted to identify as a member of their sorority because of the value of group membership, and therefore, commonly utilized communication to fit in with the group norms of their sorority. Other members of their sorority would react to their identity communication in ways that confirmed whether they were successfully or unsuccessfully conforming to the sorority's group norms. Those who were able to communicate their identities in alignment with group norms had more positive experiences and were more likely to strongly identify as a Panhellenic sorority member.

Comparatively, those who could not communicate their identities in alignment with group norms had more negative experiences and were less likely to strongly identify as a Panhellenic sorority member.

While LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were making sense of their social identities and attempting to fit in, they also participated in and were subject to social comparison related to their Panhellenic sorority social identity and LGBTQ+ social identity. Evaluations of one's social group varied depending on the social context (Ellemers et al., 2002; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2010). For example, Zoe discussed how other sororities and fraternities on her campus viewed her sorority as a bottom house because the members of her sorority were more diverse, but to her and most of the members in her sorority, the diversity and inclusivity of their sorority were seen as adding value to their social group. Differences in evaluations also existed outside of Greek life organizations, as seen with how some of the participants faced judgment from their LGBTQ+ social group for being a part of a Panhellenic sorority. Their Panhellenic sorority social identity was seen as a positive by those in their sorority who valued the organization and its members and simultaneously viewed as negative by other LGBTQ+ people who had no sorority experience and saw Panhellenic sororities as harmful anti-LGBTQ+ organizations. These are just a couple of examples of how the evaluation of one's social group can differ based on social context. Overall, as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members are impacted by and engage in social categorization, social identification, and social comparison, their communication is shaped by numerous aspects of identity, and they rely on various communication strategies to manage their multiple, intersectional social identities.

Influential Aspects of Identity for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Communication with Other Sorority Members (RQ1)

Considerations of One's Social Identities

As found in past literature, despite the long-term involvement of LGBTQ+ people in Panhellenic sororities, the visibility of these individuals was limited (Anderson, 2021). This lack of visibility contributed to a lack of understanding that previous research and this current study address (e.g., Anderson, 2021; Littlefield, 2016; Scott, J. B., 2018; Windmeyer and Freeman, 2001). Specifically, the findings from this study provided insight into the ways that sorority members' various social identities shaped the ways they developed their identities as sorority members and communicated their multiple identities to others. Regarding sexuality, participants had varied perspectives on how influential their sexuality was. For some, typically those in more accepting sororities, their sexuality was not an important aspect of their identity or influential for their communication because they perceived it to be a more private identity, similar to those in Littlefield's (2016) research, and/or because their sorority was accepting of differing sexualities.

While some research has highlighted the ways Panhellenic sororities can be accepting of diverse sexualities (e.g., Littlefield, 2016; Scott, J. B., 2018), the majority of the literature on Panhellenic sororities has focused on the ways these social groups are exclusionary (e.g., Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Stone & Gorga, 2014). In this study, participants discussed positive and negative sorority experiences. Some participants were able to have mostly positive experiences as their sorority was accepting of diverse identities. Additionally, others who were in Panhellenic sororities that were less accepting of diverse identities struggled in various ways but were still able to have positive moments as they made friends, learned more about themselves, and more. In terms issues regarding their sexuality, most of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members struggled to avoid thinking about their sexuality, not necessarily because it was a major part of their identity, but because it could impact the ways

they were able to fit in with their sorority. The less accepting one's sorority was, the more salient their sexuality was when communicating with other sorority members, as they wanted to avoid categorization threats that could lead to them being perceived as LGBTQ+, and therefore, not fitting in with the group norms of their sorority (Branscombe et al., 1999). In response, these LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members would communicate in cisheteronormative ways so that they could better align with their Panhellenic sorority social identity.

One of the ways that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could communicate in cisheteronormative ways would be by portraying hegemonic femininity (e.g., wearing tight feminine clothing) because the performance of gender contributed to their performance of sexuality (i.e., looking feminine contributed to someone appearing to be heterosexual), which aligned with previous literature that states the intersectionality of gender and sexuality shape how individuals communicate their gender (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Most of the participants' sororities expected members to be feminine. For some, this was just because most of the members were feminine, but for others, the expectations stemmed from their valuing hegemonic femininity over other gender presentations. The inherent femininity of sororities allowed some, particularly the nonbinary LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member, to figure out how they wanted to construct their gender identity as they were able to play around with communicating gender in more feminine ways than they were used to by following the group norms for gender communication in their sorority. Their experience reflected those of other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in previous research who were able to model their gender communication after those in their sororities that portrayed dominant expressions of feminine gender (Barber et al., 2024; Bielaska, 2023; Sasso, 2018).

The intersectionality of sexuality and gender was not the only instance of intersectionality being influential for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other sorority members. For those in less accepting Panhellenic sororities, if they had other marginalized identities, it became even harder to communicate their LGBTQ+ identity because they already felt like they did not fit into the group norms. These experiences were also seen in other studies where Panhellenic sorority members experienced greater hardships when they had multiple marginalized identities (Barber et al., 2024; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019). The more marginalized identities they had, the more opportunities there were for them to communicate in ways that violated group norms and compromised their ability to solidify their social identity as a Panhellenic sorority member and feel connected to their sorority. The current study found that the effects of marginalized identities could be lessened if one's marginalized identities were less visible or harder for others to perceive, as they could avoid communicating their marginalized identities and instead communicate their identities in ways that aligned with dominant group norms.

Even in Panhellenic sororities that were accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could still have issues with communicating due to their other intersectional identities. Previous research on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members has often only discussed the impact of one's identities in relation to their sexuality, but for these individuals, just because their sorority was accepting of LGBTQ+ identities did not mean that they would not have other identities that did not fit within their sorority's group norms (e.g., Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Littlefield, 2016). The aspects of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' social identities that they had to consider when communicating with other members all depended on how well their social identities fit in with the group norms of their sorority.

Importance of Panhellenic Sororities' Social Identities

The LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in this study discussed how Panhellenic sororities all differed, and you could not generalize them just because they shared a name (e.g., Two Delta Gamma sorority chapters at different campuses could have completely different social identities). The social identities varied in terms of whether they were a top house or a bottom house, the degree to which they were diverse and inclusive, and the different versions of social identity that could exist within one sorority. Previous research has identified the informal social ranking of Panhellenic sororities but used the terms top-tier and bottom-tier instead of top house and bottom house (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). Despite the slight variations in terms, the findings remained the same. Top houses were typically the more cisheteronormative, white, thin, Christian, and hegemonically feminine sororities with stricter group norms for how members could communicate their identities, and bottom houses were typically the more diverse and inclusive sororities with more open group norms for how members could communicate their identities. The higher-ranked a sorority was, the more social power they had within the Greek life system (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020). As found in previous studies, ranking was assigned largely by fraternity members but also by other Panhellenic sorority members (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). This research specifically identified that out-group perceptions of one's sorority were often communicated through jokes based on stereotypes of the sorority, and that one's sorority could resist these out-group perceptions by not caring about the stereotypes and/ or accepting the stereotypes.

The LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who were in Panhellenic sororities that did not care about and/ or resisted negative out-group perceptions regarding their social identity were able to gain value from being more diverse and inclusive. These sororities attracted members

who would not fit in with other, more traditional and restrictive Panhellenic sororities, as they were able to identify with the sorority's social identity and authentically communicate while still fitting in. However, these sororities were not always void of any problematic group norms that could restrict members' communication. While previous work has focused on how bottom houses are usually diverse and inclusive (e.g., Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018), this study identified that there is more nuance. Most of the diverse and inclusive Panhellenic sororities still had group norms that stigmatized communication about particular social identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ identities could be accepted, but it was not normal to talk about them, or you could talk about LGBTQ+ identities but not about being a mentally ill or neurodivergent person).

Alternatively, as detailed in past research, those in more restrictive Panhellenic sororities with more dominant and socially powerful social identities all had largely similar group norms that led to LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members being expected to avoid communicating any marginalized identities that did not align with the sorority's social identity or risk losing their in-group member status (Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019). Additionally, the current study found that a sorority's social identity could have stable variations (i.e., the sorority could have two social identities at once) or fluid variations (i.e., the sorority's social identity could change over time). This finding differed from previous research that focused on each sorority having only one social identity, as it showed that there could be multiple ways to fit in. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had to be in tune with their sorority's social identity variations so that they could communicate in ways that aligned with their sororities' group norms and social identity. Overall, the social identities for each Panhellenic sorority differed in some ways, but similarities occurred depending on their shared social identity traits of being a top house or a bottom house, the levels

of diversity and inclusivity that they had, and the stable and fluid variations of social identities that they had.

Structural Barriers for Change

In alignment with previous literature, the exclusive and elusive history of Panhellenic sororities remained impactful, as many Panhellenic sororities still struggled with controversial group norms that made it hard for those with marginalized identities to be able to communicate their identities authentically and still feel connected to their sorority (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Case et al., 2005; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019; Littlefield, 2016; Scott, J.F., 1965). While Panhellenic sororities were found to be less exclusionary towards those with diverse identities than they were in the past, the degree to which they changed varied by chapter, depending on the structural barriers that existed within their local social group (Case et al., 2005; Evans, 2023; Littlefield, 2016). Previous research identified the effects of geographic culture (e.g., if someone was from the North, their sorority would be less exclusive and if someone was from the South, their sorority would be more exclusive) as being the main contributing factor that influences the degree to which sororities become less exclusive than they were in the past (Berbary, 2012; Evans, 2023). However, the findings from this study did not find consistent support for the idea that Panhellenic sororities in the North were less exclusive than sororities in the South. Instead, the only consistent pattern was that bottom houses tended to be more diverse and inclusive than top houses due to their less restrictive group norms. The bottom houses seemed to develop as places for individuals who could not be accepted into other, more exclusive, sororities. The more diverse and inclusive a sorority was, the less their group norms for acceptance of marginalized identities were affected by structural barriers, such as exclusivity,

the structure of leadership, private versus public influences, and cisheteronormative fraternity connections.

As mentioned, some Panhellenic sororities were able to distance themselves from the exclusive roots of the NPC by being more diverse and inclusive. However, no Panhellenic sororities were able to escape the class-based exclusivity of Panhellenic sororities, as paying to be a part of the organization was not an option for anyone. This finding contributes to previous literature that discussed the class-based exclusivity of Panhellenic sororities by detailing how class seemed to be the one structural barrier of exclusivity that remained constant, regardless of the diversity and inclusivity of the Panhellenic sorority (Bielaska, 2023; Boschini & Thompson, 1998). Continuing, this study expanded on what was known about the leadership structure of the NPC by providing further support for the claims that Panhellenic members are affected by chapter, local, and national leadership and that both members with and without leadership positions are subject to feeling like they have to regulate the ways they communicate with other members in response to the leadership structure (Evans, 2023; Scott, J.F., 1965). Previously, these claims have been discussed in ways that generalized their effects for all sororities, but this study found that negative perceptions of the leadership structure depended on the degree to which leadership members enforced exclusive group norms. Panhellenic sororities that were more diverse and inclusive typically had chapter-level leadership that reflected, enforced, and maintained those group norms. The more diverse and inclusive the sorority was, the less LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members experienced negative effects from all levels of leadership, except in some cases, as seen with Sue's sorority, which became disconnected from the NPC after being shut down for not aligning with the NPC's national level group norms. This

was a rare case, but it is important to address it as it showed that there was a hierarchy to the leadership structure where the national level held the most control.

The leadership structure also contributed to the effects that being in a public or private setting shaped the ways LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could communicate with other members. Similar to past research, leadership figures were seen as cops who policed members, ensuring that they communicated in ways that aligned with group norms (Berbary, 2012; Evans, 2023; Scott, J.F., 1956). In addition to confirming these findings, the current results showed that the effects of private and public influences existed beyond the leadership structure, as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members also discussed experiencing real and manufactured feelings of surveillance from other sorority members. Since Panhellenic sorority members would commonly be in classes, around campus, and at social events, it was hard for many LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to escape feelings of surveillance, even when they were not actually around any other members. Another extension related to this barrier of public versus private influences was that living in one's sorority house further blurred the lines between public and private settings. Those who lived in their sorority's house reported feeling like even their rooms were not safe because they were shared with other members and because it was a common group norm for members to be able to go into each other's rooms without asking. The fear from feelings of surveillance was more prominent the less one's sorority was diverse and inclusive, as that meant there were more expectations related to identity and how members should and should not communicate their identities as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. Together, these findings show how the structure of Panhellenic sororities can compound feelings of surveillance that individuals are already exposed to outside of sororities, particularly when the sorority has less diverse and inclusive group norms.

As for the last structural barrier influenced by levels of diversity and inclusion, the more diverse and inclusive a sorority was, the less attachment they had to cisheteronormative fraternity connections. Alternatively, those who were in less diverse and inclusive sororities shared that their sorority had ties to fraternities on campus, and these ties informed the culture of their sorority, how comfortable individuals felt communicating about their LGBTQ+ identities, and how their sorority was perceived/ socially ranked. These results aligned with previous findings that explained how fraternity members' cisheteronormative expectations for Panhellenic sorority members to connect with and appeal to fraternity members led to those who communicated their identities in ways that reflected hegemonic femininity (e.g., being white, thin, upper-class, cisgender, and heterosexual) being rewarded (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). The more diverse and inclusive a sorority was, the lower they were ranked (Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Scott, J. B., 2018). Although Panhellenic sororities that were diverse and inclusive typically cared less about their ranking, the act of social ranking still occurred, except for a couple of the Panhellenic sororities that were on smaller campuses, as was found by Scott, J.B. (2018), and for one LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member who was involved in their sorority over ten years ago. Overall, the structural barriers that were identified in this study aligned with and added to those previously identified, and expanded understanding of their effects by identifying how levels of diversity and inclusion related to a sorority's group norms.

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Communication Strategies for Managing Multiple, Intersectional Social Identities (RQ2)

Conforming to Group Norms

As described in previous research, individuals generally relied on group norms to inform their communication choices in their social groups, but LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members

were found to be especially sensitive to group norms because they were subject to power dynamics within their sorority as they constructed and communicated their identities to others (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Hoggs & Reid, 2006). LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members often took in information from group communication to understand their sorority's social identity and group norms and made decisions about how they could communicate in ways that would allow them to be a part of the social group (Anderson, 2021; Berbary, 2012). Panhellenic sororities with more open group norms were often considered by outsiders the be bottom houses, but the members within them valued inclusion, and therefore, derived value from their open group norms. The way these sororities were able to value their sorority differently reflects the idea that social context influences evaluations of and power given to social identities, as the social contexts of their sorority being more open led to them valuing the diversity and inclusivity of their sorority, compared to others with more exclusive social contexts who viewed more diverse and inclusive sororities as more negative and less powerful (Ellemers et al., 2002; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2010).

In more exclusive sororities with less open group norms, those who were able to communicate dominant identities (e.g., appearing to be white, hegemonically feminine, and cisheteronormative) through their physical appearance held more power than those who did not or were not able to communicate their identities in ways that aligned with their restrictive group norms (Evans, 2023; Scott, J.F., 1965; Worthen, 2014). LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members in these types of sororities faced categorization threats if they could not communicate dominant identities and were perceived to be LGBTQ+ because being LGBTQ+ could lead others to feel like they did not fit in (Branscombe et al., 1999). The identity threats LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members faced in sororities with more restrictive group norms were made worse for

those with additional marginalized identities (e.g., being a person of color, being overweight, not being Christian, etc.) because of the intersectionality of their identities (Barber et al., 2024; Crenshaw, 1991; Evans, 2023; Garcia, 2019). Compared to these more exclusive Panhellenic sororities, more diverse and inclusive Panhellenic sororities could be perceived as having fewer group norms, but in reality, it was that they did not have to worry as much about communication because their group norms were more open. These findings show the impact of group norms on communication and that group norms do not have to be restrictive for communication if they are more open and flexible.

As a whole, Panhellenic sororities had a broad spectrum of group norms in terms of their openness, which directly influenced how comfortable members felt communicating their marginalized identities. Yet, regardless of whether the group norms were more or less diverse and inclusive, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members wanted to communicate their identities in ways that aligned with their sorority's group norms because having perceived differences in identities made it harder for them to become a part of the group, solidify their social identity, avoid rejection, and for some (e.g., those in more exclusive sororities), avoid discrimination (Evans, 2023; Gillig et al., 2022; Stone & Gorga, 2014). If LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could not communicate a cohesive social identity that fit their sorority's group norms, they would not be able to solidify their social identity (Gillig et al., 2022).

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members wanted to be able to develop and connect with their Panhellenic sorority identity because group membership came with positive effects regarding their sense of belonging, self-esteem, social support, and social power (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Chapman, 2008; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018). Previous research identified that the more connected individuals feel, the more

committed they will feel to their sorority, and the more desire they will have to communicate in ways that align with their sorority's group norms (Copeland et al., 2025; Hogg & Abrahms, 1998; Lee, 2014). While the results largely supported this claim, it was also found that even when members did not feel connected or committed to their sorority, they could still want to communicate in ways that would allow them to fit in. For these individuals, the act of being a part of their sorority's community was enough to make them want to avoid differences, which shows the extreme importance of group membership for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

Another big reason as to why LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members wanted to fit in was that they did not want to be rejected. As stated in previous literature, when LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not meet expectations of conforming to group norms, they risked being rejected and losing access to the positive effects of group membership (Bielaska, 2023; Campbell, 2012; Copeland, 2012; Ispa-Landa & Oliver, 2020; Littlefield, 2016; Sasso, 2018; Scott, C.R., 2007). The LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who were not able to or chose to conform to group norms did not take their differences lightly and had to consciously think about the impact their communication had. The most severe cases of rejection, specifically for those in less open sororities, included LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members being discriminated. The various forms of oppression that were communicated through restrictive group norms influenced LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to utilize communicative coping strategies detailed by Ramirez & Duran (2024) to manage how they presented their marginalized identities through avoidance (e.g., repressing their LGBTQ+ identity), passing (e.g., hiding their LGBTQ+ identity and portraying a false non-LGBTQ+ identity), and assimilation (e.g., meeting the standards to become a cohesive part of the social group).

Altogether, the results aligned with and contributed to previous claims about the motivations LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had for communicating in ways that minimized their differences from their sorority so that they could conform to their sorority's group norms.

Resisting Group Norms

Not all LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were able to and/ or chose to conform to their sorority's group norms. These individuals would communicate in ways that resisted, and in some cases, changed their sorority's group norms. While previous research on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members has had limited findings regarding how LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members utilize communication for resistance, the findings from this study do mostly align with SIT's claims about what happens when individuals are not able to get value from their social group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). However, while Branscombe et al. (1999) stated that individuals with higher levels of group identification and commitment are more likely to defend and/ or stay with their social group, these LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members often chose to stay and resist group norms even if they did not identify with their sorority because their commitment and desire to be able to get value from their sorority was strong enough to ignore their lack of identification. It was never an easy decision for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to leave, no matter how little they identified with their sorority, because they could see the potential value they could gain if they could create positive changes in their sorority.

Still, the experiences LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had with resisting group norms generally aligned with SIT's claims that people can attempt to create change to make their social group better meet their expectations and needs to gain value and feelings of commitment from their sorority (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority

members would attempt to create change by communicating things they did not like about their sorority to other sorority members or by publicly communicating their marginalized identities to push against their sorority's expectations for identity communication. For some, communicating in these ways successfully led to change. In instances where it did not, LGBTQ+ sorority members experienced further losses of connection with their sorority and were faced with the decision to stay despite things not changing or leave their sorority. Those who stayed knew that they did not fit in with their sorority, but did not want to leave because they were still able to find some sources of value from their group membership that outweighed their desires to leave (e.g., the few friendships they had in the sorority or professional opportunities that came from the sorority). They redefined how they thought about their sorority to focus on the positives so that they could put up with the negatives. For those who did not or could not stay, their lack of connection to their sorority took over, leaving them with negative perceptions of their previous social group. While the effects of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic members' resistance varied, their experiences all showed that they were not just passively participating and that they were passionate about making their relationship with their sorority work because of the possible value they saw their sorority having.

Managing Out-Group Perceptions of In-Group Identities

Previous research on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members has focused on these individuals' experiences within their sorority and not their experiences with being perceived as a Panhellenic sorority member by others. The current study found that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were consistently confronted with out-group perceptions of Panhellenic sororities, especially from LGBTQ+ people who were not Panhellenic sorority members, that they had to manage as they balanced their seemingly conflicting social identities as Panhellenic

sorority members and LGBTQ+ people. Out-group perceptions often framed Panhellenic sororities as problematic and vain organizations. While some of their negative beliefs were based on the reality of Panhellenic sororities having a history of being exclusionary, which for many Panhellenic sororities has continued to be true in the present, some negative views were reflective of sexist and misogynistic stereotypes that devalued feminine organizations and work. In response to these views, LGBTQ+ non-Panhellenic sorority members would commonly presumptively question, misunderstand, devalue, and/ or communicate sympathy for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members before ever asking what their experiences were like, which shows how assumed stereotypes lead out-group perceptions of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members.

When LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were interacting with LGBTQ+ non-Panhellenic sorority members, they would explain their Panhellenic sorority identity, disidentify with/ devalue their Panhellenic sorority identity, or avoid communicating about their Panhellenic sorority identity. Those who explained their Panhellenic sorority identity would do so to attempt to address misunderstandings about their experiences. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who identified with and connected with their sorority would focus on the positives to correct negative perceptions, which aligns with Branscombe et al.'s (1999) findings that those with strong levels of identification and commitment are more likely to defend their social group to outsiders. In contrast, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who did not identify or connect with their sorority would acknowledge the negatives, explain how they were different from the rest of the sorority social group, and detail the positive reasons that they stayed, such as having LGBTQ+ friends in their Panhellenic sorority. By explaining how they were different from the other "bad" Panhellenic sorority members and why they stayed, they were attempted to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes of Panhellenic sororities (e.g., that they are all

homophobic, racist, classist, etc.) and avoid categorization threats towards their LGBTQ+ identities (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Similarly, those who agreed with the negative out-group perceptions from LGBTQ+ people outside of their sorority but struggled to explain why they were a Panhellenic sorority member would just disidentify with/ devalue their sorority identity by acknowledging the issues of their sorority, insulting their sorority, making jokes about their sorority, and/ or accepting sympathy for their experiences. As found in previous literature, typically the individuals who communicated in these ways were those who did not identify or connect with their Panhellenic sorority identity (Branscombe et al., 1999). Another communication tactic LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members would use was avoiding communication about their Panhellenic sorority identity because they did not want to upset people who had poor experiences with Panhellenic sororities, or because they did not want to have to deal with negative perceptions from LGBTQ+ people with no Panhellenic sorority experience. For some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, not communicating their Panhellenic sorority identity was a way of protecting others because they knew many had been harmed by exclusionary Panhellenic sororities. This method was used by the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members regardless of their connection to their Panhellenic sorority because, as stated previously, these individuals could simultaneously recognize the bad of their sororities and still choose to stay because they were able to redefine their group membership to find positives in their experiences.

Other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not communicate about their Panhellenic sorority identity because they wanted to avoid having to discuss out-group perceptions that they felt invalidated their identities as LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. They felt that LGBTQ+ people and others who had not been in a Panhellenic sorority would

never understand their experiences, and they did not want to be confronted with negative stereotypes that framed Panhellenic sorority identities as bad femininities. These out-group perceptions of Panhellenic sorority members portraying bad femininities are similar to exclusionary Panhellenic sororities' views that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members portray pariah femininities (Stone & Gorga, 2014). Although the definitions vary, (i.e., out-group definitions of bad femininities describe those who communicate hegemonic femininity at the expense of marginalized femininities and pariah femininities describes those who communicate any femininity that is not hegemonic), both are used to socially categorize and compare individuals to make their group look good and the other group look bad (Stone & Gorga, 2014; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The pressures from LGBTQ+ people outside of their sorority and their fellow Panhellenic sorority members left LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members having to use various communication strategies in an attempt to maintain their social identities as LGBTQ+ people and Panhellenic sorority members, highlighting the ways that individuals have to rely on communication when they have social identities perceived by others to be conflicting.

Connecting with Other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

Despite common stereotypes that all Panhellenic sorority members are cisgender and heterosexual (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001), which led most LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to not expect to meet other LGBTQ+ people in their sorority, all of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members knew of and/ or were friends with other LGBTQ+ people in Panhellenic sororities. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members valued other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members because they were the only ones who could truly understand each other's experiences due to their intersectional shared social identities as LGBTQ+ people and

Panhellenic sorority members. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members would consciously communicate (e.g., verbally telling each other they are LGBTQ+) and subconsciously communicate (e.g., wearing clothing or having hairstyles associated with the LGBTQ+ community) to one another as a way of finding each other and developing bonds. While previous research largely focuses on the communication between non-LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, this study's findings show that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were able to communicate more openly with one another, compared to LGBTQ+ non-Panhellenic sorority members and non-LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, regardless of the group norms of their other social groups, because of their multiple intersectional shared identities.

Theoretical Implications

Considering Aspects of Social Identities that Shape Communication

Although the goal of this study was not to test SIT, the findings did include meaningful theoretical implications regarding concepts from SIT. The findings from RQ1 have theoretical implications for SIT in terms of the impact of the intersectionality, visibility, and fluidity of social identities on communication. Regarding intersectionality, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members mentioned three to ten different identities ($M = 5.12$; $SD = 2$) when discussing how their identities influenced their communication with other Panhellenic sorority members. Even when they were only asked about the influences of LGBTQ+ identities on their communication, they mentioned more than just their gender and sexuality because they could not separate the ways their identities all worked together to inform their lived experiences and shape their communication in response to those lived experiences. Although intersectionality is not formally a part of SIT (Tajefel, 1974), the findings from this study indicate that there is value in

considering intersectionality when using SIT as a guiding framework for analysis, as it deepens understanding of the ways one's multiple social identities simultaneously impact how they communicate with in-group and out-group members.

People, including LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, have more than one social identity, and problems can arise when they try to manage the complexity of their intersectional social identities, especially if they are seen as conflicting (Bulmer, 2013; Crenshaw, 19991; Evans, 2023; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not see themselves as just LGBTQ+ or just Panhellenic sorority members. Their multiple, intersectional social identities made them who they were, so only focusing on one identity would not be authentic to who they were, how they were viewed, how they experienced the world, and what aspects of identity they had to consider when communicating. The importance of the intersectionality of their identities highlights a need to further consider intersectionality when doing research within the framework of SIT.

Another valuable theoretical contribution that came about from this study was the importance of visibility of one's intersectional social identities (i.e., the degree to which one's social identities were perceivable by others). Previous SIT research has discussed how the salience of one's social identity informs the impact of that social identity when communicating in a particular situation, to what extent they try to conform to group norms, how much they identify with their social identity, and the degree to which they feel they belong in their social group (Hogg & Reid, 2006). In this study, visibility refers to how perceivable one's social identity was to others. The more visible an identity was, the harder it was for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to hide it, and therefore, the more salient it became. Less visible identities could still be salient (e.g., LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who appeared to be

heterosexual, but were still constantly thinking about their LGBTQ+ identity when communicating with other members), but were easier to hide or avoid communicating about than more visible identities (e.g., it was easier for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic members who were "white-passing" to avoid thinking about their race when communicating with others compared to those who were visibly people of color). The visibility of their identities informed how many options they had to communicate.

Additionally, the visibility of others' identities in their social group mattered. The more diverse and positive representation of identities there was (e.g., having members with different sexualities, races, gender identities, etc. that were accepted in the sorority), the more comfortable LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members felt communicating their various social identities with other members and felt connected to their sorority, as visibility and positive reactions to that visibility seemed to inform the group norms, levels of acceptance for varying identity communication, the likelihood of their feeling comfortable communicating their various social identities, and how connected they felt to their sorority. Altogether, these results indicate that the visibility of social identities, along with the salience of their social identities, could be important when using SIT's concepts for analysis.

Finally, the findings showed that Panhellenic sororities' social identities and group norms were not fixed, as there could be multiple versions of social identities and group norms at one time (stable variations), and/ or there could be different social identities and group norms depending on the time and setting (fluid variations). SIT typically focuses on one set of group norms and one social identity of a social group, but these findings show that there can be variations within one social group (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had to be aware of the variations so that they could communicate accordingly

and try to maintain identification with their sorority. Changes in a sorority's social identity could make it harder for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to feel connected with their sorority and other Panhellenic sorority members. In Panhellenic sororities with stable variations, issues could arise when a LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member did not fit any of the social identities for their sororities, because, despite the options, they still did not fit in and struggled to communicate their identities in ways that aligned with their sorority's social identities and group norms. For those with fluid variations, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members could face conflict if they no longer identified with their sorority's new social identity. However, fluid variations could be positive if the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member identified with the new social identity more than their previous one. Either way, these results indicate that social identities and group norms can be fluid and vary within one social group, as social identities are not always restricted to one way of existing.

Communicating to Manage Seemingly Conflicting Social Identities

The findings from RQ2 have theoretical implications for SIT regarding the experiences one can have when they have conflicting social identities. Communication was a tool that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members used to manage their multiple intersectional social identities, which was important as their social identities as LGBTQ+ people and Panhellenic sorority members were perceived to be conflicting by those in their LGBTQ+ and Panhellenic social groups. Even though it was not typical for people to choose to have conflicting social identities, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did, which made them vulnerable to personal and interpersonal conflict as they often had to communicate strategically to manage their social identities. (Bulmer, 2013; Evans, 2023; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Some of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not know they were LGBTQ+ when they joined the sorority

and did not recognize their LGBTQ+ identity until they were already established Panhellenic sorority members or after they graduated and were no longer active members. Additionally, some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not have LGBTQ+ communities that they were a part of when they were in their sorority. Since these individuals were not actively in touch with their Panhellenic sorority social identity and their LGBTQ+ social identity at the same time, they usually did not have to worry about their conflicting social identities until it came to explaining to LGBTQ+ people who had never been in a Panhellenic sorority why they were once a part of Panhellenic sororities as an LGBTQ+ person.

Alternatively, those who did have a LGBTQ+ community they were involved in and/or knew they were LGBTQ+ before joining their sorority had different experiences with and perspectives on their seemingly conflicting social identities, as they had to manage both at the same time during and after their Panhellenic sorority involvement. Although the timelines of when LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members had to manage their Panhellenic sorority and LGBTQ+ social identities varied, they all encountered situations where they would have to use communication to manage their social identities when interacting with others. The communication strategies LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members used (e.g., explaining, devaluing/ disidentifying, avoiding, and connecting with those with both shared social identities) provide insight into how individuals utilize communication to make sense of and maneuver their social identities that are perceived to be conflicting by others and/or themselves.

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who chose to explain their Panhellenic sorority social identity to their LGBTQ+ social group most commonly did so because the value they were getting from their sorority group membership was enough that they wanted to be able to maintain both social identities and help their LGBTQ+ social group understand their experiences. Another

less common reason that explaining was used was that they did not see their two social identities as conflicting, which typically occurred with those in more diverse and inclusive sororities, where they were less confronted with the negative experiences that others had. Both of these reasons were also cited by those who engaged in avoidance. Those who chose avoidance over explaining did so because it could make others and/or themselves uncomfortable, and/or because they were tired of having to explain their social identities. Being able to avoid communicating about the conflict allowed them to maintain peace for themselves and others. Overall, many of the LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members used these communication strategies because they wanted to be able to have both of their social identities simultaneously.

In contrast, devaluing/ disidentifying with one's Panhellenic sorority social identity was specifically used by those who gained minimal value and feelings of connection from their Panhellenic sorority social group because they gained more value from their LGBTQ+ social identity than from their Panhellenic sorority social identity. Due to this mismatch of value and connections, they prioritized their LGBTQ+ social identity over their Panhellenic sorority identity and used communication so that others would know where they stood and/or so that they could vent about their struggles and possibly receive sympathy from other LGBTQ+ people. The final strategy of communicating to connect with those with both shared social identities was used by LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members when communicating with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members because they wanted to be able to communicate freely with people who could better understand their experiences, compared to those with only one of their shared social identities. Even if they did not have the same LGBTQ+ identities or experiences in their social groups, they could escape feeling the need to explain, devalue/ disidentify, or avoid communicating about being a LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member. Often, these connections

helped them navigate their experiences, feel seen and understood, and handle the difficulties that came with having two seemingly conflicting social identities. Important to know is that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were not limited to one communication method or reason for communicating. Their social identity management strategies and motivations were fluid and chosen based on their experiences with their social groups and what their goals for communication were.

Overall, there are multiple takeaways from these findings. First, communication strategies were necessary to manage their own and others' feelings about their Panhellenic sorority and LGBTQ+ social identities. Even when they avoided communication, the avoidance was a choice they made as a communication strategy. This insight shows how important and inescapable communication is when managing social identities. Second, the conflict between their social identities could be perceived by themselves and/or perceived by others, as seen with how some LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not personally view their social identities as conflicting, but still had to use communication strategies to maneuver interactions they had with others who did, which indicates that the viewpoint of particular social identities being conflicting can be subjective. Not everyone views and experiences the relationships between social identities the same, so it is important not to overly generalize and assume that some social identities are conflicting just because some believe them to be. Third, the findings show that individuals can find relief from the issues that occur due to their perceived conflicting social identities through finding connections with others who share their perceived conflicting social identities. While these connections did not fix their problems, they did allow an outlet and safe place for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to feel seen and understood, communicate openly, and seek guidance on how to manage their social identities. The benefits that came from

being able to connect with others experiencing the same conflict from their social identities may partially explain why some individuals maintain two social identities, even when they are perceived to be conflicting.

Finally, the motivations to try to maintain both social identities were strong because of the value associated with Panhellenic sorority group membership and because they could not simply choose not to be LGBTQ+. Being LGBTQ+ was who they were, but being a Panhellenic sorority member was something they chose because of the real or potential benefits they did or could receive. As previously discussed, deciding to leave one's Panhellenic sorority was a slow and painful process, only done by those who had exhausted all other avenues. Even if LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not identify with or feel connected with their Panhellenic sorority, they still chose to stay until they felt like they had to leave or were forced to leave. For LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, the promise of community that came with their Panhellenic sorority carried more weight than how well they fit in. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members were just people who wanted connections because human connections were perceived to add value to their lives. The desire to cultivate connections, even when they were hard or impossible to feel, and the promises of community that Panhellenic sororities offered were enough to motivate them to try to communicate in ways that they could maintain their Panhellenic sorority and LGBTQ+ social identities. The extreme efforts these individuals put in suggest that motivations to stay in a social group are more complex than solely being based on identification and connection. Altogether, these findings show the complexity of individuals' communication decisions and motivations when managing multiple seemingly conflicting social identities.

Practical Implications

Varying practical implications exist for the public, the NPC and its Panhellenic sororities, and LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. The public must work to deconstruct harmful and limiting generalizations about Panhellenic sorority members so that the diverse identities and experiences within Panhellenic sororities can be recognized. The NPC and its Panhellenic sororities need to implement structural changes to address issues that create an unsafe environment for many Panhellenic sorority members, including LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. Practical implications for the public and Panhellenic sororities are important to note and should be implemented. However, it is not necessarily realistic for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to depend on the public and NPC to change in the immediate future. Considering this lack of timely change, it is crucial that, when possible, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members ask for help when they are struggling and prioritize diversifying where they are looking to develop connections and communities so that they are not reliant on Panhellenic sororities for valuable group membership.

Practical Implications for the Public

Thishighlights the importance of questioning stereotypes about LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sororities, as the findings show that these individuals, their experiences, and communication choices are far more complex and different than common public perceptions (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001). The findings can be utilized to inform positive changes for how Panhellenic sororities are perceived and evaluated by those outside of Panhellenic sororities. It is important to push against stereotypical views that sororities are simply gender-segregated organizations where members party, focus on boys, and engage in other cisheteronormative behavior. It is true that Panhellenic sororities were originally created as exclusive, cisheteronormative organizations that marginalized individuals with nondominant identities, and some Panhellenic sororities still

operate as extensions of these problematic roots. However, simply watering Panhellenic sororities down to these stereotypes overly generalizes Panhellenic sororities and ignores work that some Panhellenic sorority members are doing to make their sororities better. To truly create positive change for Panhellenic sororities, it is important not to generalizeall Panhellenic sororities and their members. Instead, positive work being done by particular Panhellenic sororities and their members should be highlighted and utilized to inform change on an institutional level.

Practical Implications for the NPC and its Panhellenic Sororities

Once we dismantle stereotypes and recognize Panhellenic sororities' potential for positive change, we can begin to address the issues that exist within them by making structural changes, with the goal of making Panhellenic sororities better for current and future members. For example, positive differences could be made with the introduction of better training for members so that they can develop the skills needed to create a positive community. Currently, sorority chapters are run by members with the guidance of individuals in leadership positions at the local and national levels. It was regularly discussed that the current training that members receive regarding how to coordinate events, welcome new members, communicate with one another, mediate conflict, support members going through traumatic events, and more is not sufficient. Panhellenic sorority members cannot be expected to run their sorority properly without better guidance that teaches them how to navigate, manage, and communicate things in positive ways.

Additionally, Panhellenic sororities would benefit from implementing more formal support systems to assist members in need. Although improving training can help better equip Panhellenic sorority members with the valuable skills that will help them in and outside of their

sorority, there is only so much these trainings can and should do. Undergraduate students are not qualified and should not be expected to address serious issues such as mental health crises, homophobic attacks, and grief, just to name a few. Instead of depending on DEI or conflict management leadership members to tackle such heavy topics, there should be formalized systems in place for members to get assistance from individuals qualified to help them. Doing this would also address privacy concerns that arise when Panhellenic sorority members are expected to go to other members in leadership positions about sensitive topics. There are just some topics that these individuals should not be expected to communicate through.

Finally, there should be more conscious efforts made to diversify the inclusion of individuals on a chapter, local, and national level so that all voices can be heard and considered. These LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members did not mention feeling any safer or more included in their sororities because the NPC and their local chapter had a DEI statement or made social media posts celebrating diversity. Surface-level recognition is not enough for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and others with marginalized identities to feel accepted and avoid discrimination. In order for the NPC to truly be inclusive, there must be long-term efforts to positively include individuals with diverse identities on all levels. Increasing visibility will, in turn, help challenge stereotypes that all Panhellenic sorority members are the same (i.e., all white, cisgender, heterosexual, politically conservative, and Christian) and make it easier for those who do not fit those stereotypes to feel comfortable joining.

Practical Implication for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members

LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members must look for ways to find help when they are struggling and diversify the connections and communities they have. In terms of seeking support, many LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members may not feel comfortable opening up about their

issues for various reasons, including if they are not public with their LGBTQ+ identity, are in a less diverse and inclusive environment, fear being misunderstood by those who do not share their social identities of being LGBTQ+ and a Panhellenic sorority member, etc. Yet, the experiences of many of the individuals in this study show that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members can find safe people to reach out to. LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members can look for individuals who directly communicate that they are safe (e.g., those that identify as allies, online and in-person LGBTQ+ support groups, affirming mental health providers, etc.) and individuals who communicate that they are safe people to go to more covertly (e.g., those that communicate more progressive beliefs, present themselves in ways associated with the LGBTQ+ community, etc.). When/ if LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members can find safe people to connect with, they should intentionally reach out if they need support dealing with difficult situations, need to vent about what is going on, require resources to address problems in their sororities, or anything that is plaguing them. Staying silent can lead to the issues they face festering and becoming worse as they are not able to get the assistance they need to address their problems.

Outside of direct support, LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members would benefit from seeking connections and community outside of their Panhellenic sorority so that they can attempt to avoid becoming overly dependent on their sorority for social support, self-esteem, sense of belonging, and self-concept. Finding additional connections and communities may be a safer way to find relief from possible issues that can occur for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, as it does not require them to disclose vulnerable information (e.g., their LGBTQ+ identity, personal problems related to being an LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority member, etc.). To diversify the connections and communities LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members have, they can join other student organizations, community groups, online communities related to their

interests, and more. Regardless of what types of connections and communities they seek, finding alternative social outlets could help meet their desires for group membership, along with their involvement in their Panhellenic sororities.

Overall, while these recommendations vary depending on the group being targeted, they all aim to accomplish the same goal of improving the experiences of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. Many sororities and sorority members are already working towards accomplishing this goal, and their progress can be used to model change so that the individual members do not continue to experience negative effects related to their multiple, intersectional social identities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study includes several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the current study could not find consistent results about the impact of the culture of the geographic area in which Panhellenic sororities were situated. This is a limitation because previous literature has identified that the culture and commonly held beliefs of the states and campuses of Panhellenic sororities inform their group norms, inclusion of individuals with diverse identities, practices, communication, and more (Evans, 2023; Berbary, 2012).). Additionally, many of the participants referenced the state they were in and the campus they were on when talking about the structural factors that impacted their experiences and communication. However, the claims made by participants showed no consistent patterns, and therefore, no generalizable claims could be made. In the future, more data should be collected to see if any patterns will emerge related to the culture of the geographic area in which Panhellenic sororities were located, and/ or a study should be done that specifically looks at this issue.

Second, while effects related to the concept of intersectionality were identified, intersectionality theory was not used as a part of the theoretical framework due to the data that was collected. There was a range of diverse identities represented, but due to some identities not being as represented as others (e.g., the sample being predominantly white and cisgender), it would have been difficult to do an in-depth analysis using intersectionality theory. In the future, researchers should strategically sample individuals to further test the impact of intersectionality on LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication and be able to apply intersectionality theory. Doing so would further contribute to what is known about the ways that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and others' multiple identities work together to inform their unique lived experiences and the ways they communicate. Third, all but one of the participants were not current Panhellenic sorority members. While this does allow us to see the consistency of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' experiences over time, it could be seen as limiting due to the lack of representation from current members who would be able to provide insight into the current state of Panhellenic sorority members. It would be beneficial if future research could increase sampling of current members.

Related to the second and third limitations, the process of collecting data was extremely challenging. Despite offering financial compensation, there was consistent hesitation to be interviewed, which was communicated while recruiting and during the interview process. I assume this issue arose due to privacy concerns. Panhellenic sororities have inherently private cultures, as seen with their secret handshakes, rituals, and more, which contribute to the expectation that members will not divulge information about the inner workings of their sorority to out-group members. There were multiple times during the interviews that participants communicated that they had to pause to think about what they did and did not want to share.

Additionally, some participants discussed that they recommended the study to other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, but those members did not want to participate due to privacy concerns. These privacy concerns could apply to all Panhellenic sorority members but would be especially impactful for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members who face concerns of having their LGBTQ+ identity become known to others. Future research should consider and address these privacy concerns so that further and more diverse data can be collected.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to increase understanding of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' experiences by looking at the aspects of identity that shape their communication with other Panhellenic sorority members and the ways they used communication to manage their multiple intersectional social identities. The findings show that the experiences and communication of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members are far more complex than stereotypes suggest. While previous research has already started the conversation about the complexities of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and their Panhellenic sororities, this research uses a communicative lens to further past discussions and explain the invaluable role of communication for LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members, and others, as they maneuver life being a part of differing social groups. The findings show that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members' communication with other sorority members is informed by their own social identities, their sororities' social identities, and the structural forces of Panhellenic sororities. Additionally, it is explained that LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members rely on communication to fit in with their sororities' group norms, resist their sororities' group norms, manage out-group perceptions of in-group social identities, and foster queer connections with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members. These findings not only improved understanding of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic

sorority members' experiences and communication but also identified valuable theoretical and practical implications that can further the study of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members and social identities more broadly.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Current Sorority Members

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your sorority experience.
    a. How long have you been in your sorority?
    b. How do you feel about your experience?
3. Are there any parts of your identity that have influenced your experience in your sorority? If so, please explain.
4. Are you public about your LGBTQ+ identity in your sorority? Why or why not?
    a. Does being public affect how you communicate with others in your sorority? If so, how?
    b. Are you public about your LGBTQ+ identity with others outside of your sorority? Why or why not?
5. What types of expectations, if any, exist in your sorority?
    a. Are there expectations regarding identity (e.g., gender and sexuality)?
    b. Are there expectations regarding relationships (e.g., are you expected to be close to other sorority members)?
    c. If so, how do these expectations affect you and the ways you communicate?
6. Have you ever felt the need to monitor or manage how you present yourself in your sorority? Why or why not?
    a. If so, how do you monitor or manage how you present yourself in your sorority?
    b. Do you act differently when interacting with your sorority members depending on whether you are in a private or public setting?

7. How do you decide what information to share with your sorority members?
    a. Is there a difference between what you share with your sorority members and other people?
8. What types of relationships do you have with your sorority?
    a. Do you have close relationships?
    b. Do you feel connected to your sorority?
    c. Are these relationships important to you? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe your closest relationship in your sorority?
    a. How did you develop this relationship?
    b. What makes this relationship your closest relationship?
10. How do you show that you care about your sorority members? Can you give me some examples?
    a. Does being LGBTQ+ affect the ways you show that you care? If so, how?
11. How do you handle conflict between you and your sorority members? Can you give me some examples?
12. Do you have relationships with other LGBTQ+ people?
    a. If you have relationships with other LGBTQ+ people, does the way you talk about your identity (e.g., being a sorority member, being LGBTQ+, etc.) with them differ from how you talk about your identity with non-LGBTQ+ people? If so, can you give me examples?
    b. If you have relationships with other LGBTQ+ people, does the way you talk about your identity (e.g., being a sorority member, being LGBTQ+, etc.) with

them differ from how you talk about your identity with other sorority members? If so, can you give me examples?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Previous Sorority Members

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your sorority experience.
    a. How long were you in your sorority?
    b. How do you feel about your experience?
3. Were there any parts of your identity that influenced your experience in your sorority? If so, please explain.
4. Were you public about your LGBTQ+ identity in your sorority? Why or why not?
    a. Did being public affect how you communicate with others in your sorority? If so, how?
    b. Were you public about your LGBTQ+ identity with others outside of your sorority? Why or why not?
5. What types of expectations, if any, existed in your sorority?
    a. Were there expectations regarding identity (e.g., gender and sexuality)?
    b. Were there expectations regarding relationships (e.g., are you expected to be close to other sorority members)?
    c. If so, how did these expectations affect you and the ways you communicated?
6. Did you ever feel the need to monitor or manage how you presented yourself in your sorority? Why or why not?
    a. If so, how did you monitor or manage how you present yourself in your sorority?
    b. Did you act differently when interacting with your sorority members depending on whether you were in a private or public setting?

7. How did you decide what information to share with your sorority members?
    a. Was there a difference between what you shared with your sorority members and other people?
8. What types of relationships did you have with your sorority?
    a. Did you have close relationships?
    b. Did you feel connected to your sorority?
    c. Were these relationships important to you? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe your closest relationship in your sorority?
    a. How did you develop this relationship?
    b. What made this relationship your closest relationship?
10. How did you show that you cared about your sorority members? Can you give me some examples?
    a. Did being LGBTQ+ affect the ways you showed that you cared? If so, how?
11. How did you handle conflict between you and your sorority members? Can you give me some examples?
12. Did you have relationships with other LGBTQ+ people at the time?
    a. If you had relationships with other LGBTQ+ people, did the way you talked about your identity (e.g., being a sorority member, being LGBTQ+, etc.) with them differ from how you talked about your identity with non-LGBTQ+ people? If so, can you give me examples?
    b. If you had relationships with other LGBTQ+ people, did the way you talked about your identity (e.g., being a sorority member, being LGBTQ+, etc.) with them

differ from how you talked about your identity with other sorority members? If so, can you give me examples?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix C

Survey Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research at the University of Oklahoma
IRB no. 19480 Approval Date 2/13/2026

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experience as an LGBTQ+ sorority member. Specifically, we are interested in learning more about you and how you and your sorority members communicate about and understand identity and relationships.

Therefore, to be eligible to participate, you must be at least 18 years old, LGBTQ+, and a current or previous Panhellenic sorority member.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to respond to a five-minute survey including demographic questions and given the opportunity to participate in a 60-minute interview, which will contain various open-ended questions asking you to describe your experiences as an LGBTQ+ sorority member. By participating, you are also giving me permission to use direct quotes from your responses, in anonymous form.

There are minimal risks to participating in this research. Discussing sensitive topics such as identity may bring up some emotions. I do not expect these to be greater than what you would experience when talking about these topics in everyday conversations. However, if you need support at any time, you may contact the following confidential and free resources: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number 1-800-273-8255 and The Trevor Project's LGBTQ+ crisis phone number 1-866-488-7386.

There is a risk of accidental data release if you consent to the collection of your data using audio 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.

To ensure accurate transcription of the recordings, we will use a transcription service. The transcription service will have access to the audio recordings and the resulting transcripts. The organization hosting the data collection and transcription platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to, or retain your data or your IP address, which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

There are no benefits from participating in this study.

Compensation will be provided in the form of $26 for completing the survey AND the interview via an online gift card. Compensation can only be earned upon voluntary completion of each study component.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may stop at any point in time and for any reason.

We might share your data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the lead researcher, Madelyn Evans, at Madelyn.d.evans-1@ou.edu. You can also contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Amy Johnson, at amyjj@ou.edu or the University of Oklahoma's Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you would like to discuss any issues regarding your rights as a research participant or if you do not want to talk to the lead researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___Yes ___No

Appendix D

Interview Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research at the University of Oklahoma
IRB no. 19480 Approval Date 2/13/2026

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experience as an LGBTQ+ sorority member. Specifically, we are interested in learning more about you and how you and your sorority members communicate about and understand identity and relationships.

Therefore, to be eligible to participate, you must be at least 18 years old, LGBTQ+, and a current or previous Panhellenic sorority member.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview, which will contain various open-ended questions asking you to describe your experiences as an LGBTQ+ sorority member. By participating, you are also giving me permission to use direct quotes from your responses, in anonymous form.

There are minimal risks to participating in this research. Discussing sensitive topics such as identity may bring up some emotions. I do not expect these to be greater than what you would experience when talking about these topics in everyday conversations. However, if you need support at any time, you may contact the following confidential and free resources: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number 1-800-273-8255 and The Trevor Project's LGBTQ+ crisis phone number 1-866-488-7386.

There is a risk of accidental data release if you consent to the collection of your data using audio 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.

To ensure accurate transcription of the recordings, we will use a transcription service. The transcription service will have access to the audio recordings and the resulting transcripts. The organization hosting the data collection and transcription platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to, or retain your data or your IP address, which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

There are no benefits from participating in this study.

Compensation will be provided in the form of $26 for completing the survey AND the interview via an online gift card. Compensation can only be earned upon voluntary completion of each study component.

We might share your data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you.

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 agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___Yes ___No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___Yes___No

Do you have a preferred pseudonym? ___Yes___No

If you have a preferred pseudonym, what is your preferred pseudonym? _____

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___No

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the lead researcher, Madelyn Evans, at Madelyn.d.evans-1@ou.edu. You can also contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Amy Janan Johnson, at amyjj@ou.edu or the University of Oklahoma's Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you would like to discuss any issues regarding your rights as a research participant or if you do not want to talk to the lead researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___Yes ___No

Finally, would you like an electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? ___Yes___No

Date of interview:

Name of Interviewee:

Email address for electronic consent copy:

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process:

Signature of the Researcher:

Appendix E

Recruitment Flyer

Are you LGBTQ+?
Are you or have you ever been a Panhellenic Sorority Member?

If so, you can complete a 5-minute survey and a 60 minute interview to recieve $26

What is the study about?

- Looking at the experiences of LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority women
- Understanding how LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members communicate with other Panhellenic sorority members

Who can participate?

- Individuals who are 18+ years old, currently identify as LGBTQ+, and are a current or previous member of a Panhellenic sorority for at least a semester

Survey Link and Code:
https://shorturl.at/gOnSv

For more information, please contact Madelyn Evans
madelyn.d.evans-1@ou.edu

Tables

Table 1. *LGBTQ+ Panhellenic Sorority Members' Demographic Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality
Riley	Woman	Lesbian
Lily	Woman	Bisexual
Lena	Woman	Lesbian
Olivia	Woman	Bisexual
Zoe	Woman	Bisexual
Victoria	Woman	Lesbian
Nina	Woman	Bisexual
Beck	Nonbinary/ Gender fluid	Lesbian
Lola	Woman	Bisexual
Audrey	Woman	Lesbian
Teresa	Woman	Lesbian
Amelia	Woman	Queer
Willow	Woman	Bisexual
Sue	Woman	Queer
Kate	Woman	Lesbian
Alex	Woman	Bisexual
Sophia	Woman	Lesbian

Table 2

Findings RQ1: What aspects of identity shape the ways LGBTQ+ sorority members communicate with other sorority members?

Theme	Description
Individual Social Identities Sexuality Gender Intersectionality and Other Influential Identities Visibility of Identities Influential Individual Social Identities Outside of LGBTQ+ Identification	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members considered their individual social identities related to their sexuality, gender, intersectionality of social identities, visibility of their identities, and social identities outside of LGBTQ+ identification when communicating with other sorority members.
Panhellenic Sorority Social Group Identities Top Houses Versus Bottom Houses Levels of Diversity and Inclusiveness Varying Stereotypes Within the Sorority	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members considered their sororities' social group identities in terms of if their sorority was a top or bottom house, how diverse and inclusive their sorority was, and the varying stereotypes within their sorority when communicating with other sorority members.
Structural Forces The Exclusivity of Panhellenic Sororities Structure of Leadership *Leadership Structures Influencing Sorority Members* *Leadership Structures Influencing Leadership Members* Private Versus Public Influences *Feeling Under Surveillance* *Living in House Versus Out of House* Fraternity Connections	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members considered their structural forces such as the exclusivity of their Panhellenic sorority, the structure of leadership, the influence of leadership structures on all sorority members, public and private influences of their sorority, feelings of surveillance, the state of living in house, and fraternity connections when communicating with other sorority members.

Table 3

Findings RQ2: In what ways do LGBTQ+ sorority members use communication to manage their multiple intersectional social identities?

Theme	Description
Utilizing Communication to Fit in with Group Norms Conforming to Open Group Norms Conforming to Mostly Open Group Norms with Some Limitations Conforming to Closed Group Norms *Conforming to Closed Group Norms to Solidify Social Identity*	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members utilized communication to conform to various group norms because they wanted to fit in. Conforming to closed group norms was particularly important to solidify one's social identity.
Utilizing Communication to Resist Group Norms Experiencing Positive Effects from Resisting Group Norms Experiencing Negative Effects from Resisting Group Norms *Losing Connections and Staying with the Sorority* *Losing/ Leaving the Sorority*	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members utilized communication to resist group norms. Resisting group norms rarely led to positive outcomes, and typically led to negative outcomes, such as losing connections to one's sorority. Losing connections to one's sorority could in some cases lead to individuals leaving their sorority.
Utilizing Communication to Manage Out-Group Perceptions Managing Negative Perceptions *Explaining Sorority Identity* *Disidentifying/ Devaluing Sorority Identity* *Avoiding Communication about Sorority Identity*	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members utilized communication to manage negative out-group perceptions of in-group identities by explaining their sorority identity, disidentifying or devaluing their sorority identity, and/ or avoiding communication about their sorority identity.
Utilizing Communication for Queer Sorority Connections	LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members utilized communication to identify and form relationships with other LGBTQ+ Panhellenic sorority members to develop queer connections that helped them manage their multiple, intersectional social identities