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and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co
SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF (DIS)CONNECTION FOR QUEER WOMEN OF
COLOR IN CULTURALLY-BASED SORORITIES

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Centering the stories of twenty Queer Women of Color (QWOC) affiliated with culturally-based sororities, this narrative inquiry study examined how social media platforms influenced the connection that participants felt to their organization. Using data from two semi-structured interviews and a reflection journal project, findings revealed how social media engagement contributed to participants' experiences in conflicting ways. Although social media spaces became avenues for Queer Women of Color to connect with other QWOC, participants also reported witnessing oppressive attitudes from sorority members that negatively informed their perceptions of their organizations. Implications for research and practice are offered.

Researchers interested in sorority and fraternity life (SFL) have long expressed the bonds that people develop within their organizations, which are seen as lifelong in nature. Under the umbrella of SFL organizations, culturally-based sororities and fraternities have also been seen to express a commitment to fostering strong and meaningful relationships for their members (Tull et al., 2018). Culturally-based sororities and fraternities include but are not limited to, organizations within the National APIDA Panhellenic Association (NAPA), National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC), and the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), in addition to historically Native American organizations and other identity-based groups that are not associated with an umbrella association. In particular, these organizations have a historic mission to fight for the uplift of racially minoritized communities, providing members the opportunity to connect with those who have similar identities and values (Torbenson, 2009). However, culturally-based sororities and fraternities are not themselves without issues. As a subset of literature on these organizations, researchers have illustrated how these groups may themselves perpetuate cultures

of heteronormativity and rely on strict gendered norms (Duran & Garcia, 2020; Garcia & Duran, 2020; Jenkins, 2012; Litterte & Hodge, 2012).

Although these types of behaviors and attitudes are not exclusive to culturally-based organizations, manifesting in historically white sororities and fraternities as well, scholars have argued for the need to understand how these settings impact Queer People of Color. Specifically, research has shown that negative beliefs around queer sexualities may linger in both culturally-based fraternities (Jenkins, 2012) and sororities (Litterte & Hodge, 2012), albeit not always overtly and explicitly. Additionally, in a study on Queer Men of Color in culturally-based fraternities, Duran and Garcia (2020) showcased how these individuals contest these behaviors in different contexts, including on virtual platforms like social media. This finding is notable given the otherwise beneficial impact that online spaces can have for queer people exploring their sexuality (Mainardi & Pavan, 2020). With this in mind, it is beneficial to explore what influence social media has on the lives of other members of culturally-based organizations, including Queer Women of Color.

Therefore, the purpose of this narrative study was to understand how Queer Women of Color

discussed the role that social media played in the connection they had to their culturally-based sororities. Part of a larger project focused on how Queer Women of Color negotiated their identities within their culturally-based organizations, social media usage was a topic that came up repeatedly, leading to this secondary analysis. Guided by Queer of Color perspectives (Ferguson, 2004, 2018; Muñoz, 1999), we were particularly interested in how these Queer Women of Color navigated potentially oppressive attitudes in these virtual spaces. The specific research question informing the study was as follows: how do Queer Women of Color describe the influence of social media on the relationship to their culturally-based sorority? Findings from this project will be informative to both campus-based professionals, as well as those that work with national organizations, as they seek to develop more affirming environments for queer members. In particular, those supporting culturally-based sororities will be more knowledgeable about how social media shapes the experiences that Queer Women of Color have in their organizations.

Literature Review

In order to set the scene for this investigation, we reviewed existing literature relevant to social media as well as culturally-based sororities. Namely, we first provide an overview of the albeit limited scholarship on the experiences that people have within culturally-based sororities. We then do a brief examination of research detailing how queer individuals navigate social media spaces.

Experiences in Culturally-Based Sororities

From their inception, culturally-based sororities have served as spaces for Women of Color to cultivate meaningful relationships – especially given the exclusion Women of Color faced from historically white organizations or culturally-based fraternities (Torbenson, 2009).

In contemporary scholarship, researchers have shown the positive academic and social outcomes that result from affiliation with a culturally-based sorority (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017; Orta et al., 2019). For example, because of their historic mission to center those who are minoritized on the basis of their gender and race, scholars have called attention to how these organizations contribute positively to members' racial identity exploration (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Orta et al., 2019).

Additionally, due to the bonds that they forge in their sororities, these organizations have other beneficial impacts on members' lives. For Women of Color enrolled at undergraduate institutions, culturally-based sororities oftentimes provide individuals with relationships that allow them to navigate racist incidents on campus (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014). Echoing findings from this study, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell's (2014) research on members of historically Black sororities showed how these organizations led to the development of social capital and communal bonds that gave them necessary assistance at their predominantly white institutions. Across these studies, what is evident is that for many, culturally-based sororities are sites in which Women of Color can cultivate relationships that support them as they navigate their broader contexts.

Albeit limited, researchers have begun examining how culturally-based sororities may perpetuate harmful messages around queer identities and those who do not conform to certain feminine norms (Hernandez, 2011; Litterte & Hodge, 2012). Notably, the work of Hernandez (2011) revealed how Black sororities specifically have been the subject of critique for enforcing strict expectations around appearance. These set of practices included regulating people's dress, hairstyles, and behaviors in order to play to middle-to-upper-class subjectivities. However, in the process, these norms can marginalize

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

those that are seen as expressing their gender differently. Aligning within these perspectives, Literte and Hodge (2012) took a specific view at historically Black sororities to understand how heterosexual members viewed homosexuality. Through twenty interviews, Literte and Hodge (2012) found that these individuals were largely accepting of homosexuality, but that they still acknowledged that sorority contexts themselves often caused people to hide queer identities. Scholarship such as Hernandez (2011), as well as Literte and Hodge (2012), thus give initial insight into the potential experiences that Queer Women of Color can face across different culturally-based sororities.

Social Media and Queer Individuals

In addition to examining the literature on culturally-based sororities themselves, we also saw it necessary to survey the research that exists on queer individuals and their relationship to social media, recognizing that there is little scholarship on social media in SFL contexts (Taylor & McArdle, 2018). Specifically, authors have shown how social media spaces can be valuable for queer individuals who are making meaning of their sexuality (e.g., Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Mainardi & Pavan, 2020; Miller, 2017; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Of note, Mainardi and Pavan's (2020) review of queer people's relationship with online spaces revealed that these individuals typically see three benefits in virtual mediums: seeing themselves represented, being able to build community, and engaging in online forms of activism.

As one of the main benefits of online realities, scholars have underscored the potential that social media has for allowing people to see themselves represented in a positive light; in turn, this has a positive influence on how they engage in meaning making around their own identity (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Mainardi & Pavan, 2020; Miller, 2017). For

many queer individuals, spending time online presents them with examples of what it means to live a healthy and fulfilling life as a queer person, which then bolsters their own well-being (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016). In fact, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter can serve as primary ways that queer individuals seek out to learn about their sexuality (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016).

In addition to serving as spaces where they can see positive representations of queer identities, scholars have articulated how social media can facilitate connections between members of the queer community that share similar identities (McInroy et al., 2019; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). In fact, virtual spaces have long been noted as sources of social networks for queer individuals who may not otherwise have the ability to foster these connections offline (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). In the example of McInroy et al.'s (2019) work, those between the ages of 14-29 were much more likely to engage with LGBTQ+ groups online due to their overall sentiments of safety. This finding also holds true in studies that center queer individuals who hold another minoritized identity, including identifying with a racially minoritized group (Lucero, 2017). Though experiences with social media for queer individuals are not altogether positive, these platforms are frequently valuable foundations of support and connection.

Epistemology and Theoretical Framework

This project was part of a larger study examining the experiences of Queer Women of Color in culturally-based sororities. In particular, we conceptualized this research project using a critical epistemology (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011) and Queer of Color perspectives (Ferguson, 2004, 2018; Muñoz, 1999) as a theoretical framework. Critical theorists assert that knowledge is constructed within a system that systemically oppresses groups of people at

the benefit of privileged communities. A critical researcher seeks to expose these structural inequalities grounded in people's experiences. In this present study, we were interested in how Queer Women of Color encounter oppressive influences in and out of their culturally-based sororities.

Aligning with critical epistemology, we mobilized Queer of Color perspectives (Ferguson, 2004, 2018; Muñoz, 1999) as our guiding framework. Queer of Color Critique sheds light on how systems such as racism, heterosexism, as well as those rooted in oppressive gender norms create the conditions in which Queer People of Color navigate and resist (Ferguson, 2004, 2018). In educational research, scholars have leveraged Queer of Color Critique to understand how groups such as LGBTQ communities or Communities of Color may themselves perpetuate forms of marginalization that impact Queer People of Color (Brockenbrough, 2015). Relevant to this specific investigation, we honed in on Muñoz (1999) concept of world-making. Specifically, Muñoz (1999) asserted that queer world-making occurs when Queer People of Color mobilize ways of being and knowing that contrast dominant ideologies: "World-making delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world" (p. 196). Rather than accept one's subjugated position in a society that disenfranchises Queer People of Color, these communities engage in a process of reimagining realities. Thus, queer world-making was of interest to us as we considered how Queer Women of Color created alternative realities in virtual spaces.

Methodology

Guided by our epistemological and theoretical foundations, we selected narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008) as our methodology for

this study. Specifically, narrative researchers begin with the belief that "people live and/or understand their lives in storied forms, connecting events in the manner of a plot that has a beginning, middle, and end points" (Josselson, 2011, p. 224). Scholars leveraging narrative methodology thus make it a point to elicit salient moments and times in participants' lives that detail their meaning-making process. In analyzing people's stories, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that researchers should attend to three main dimensions: the temporal nature of events, settings that experiences take place, as well as personal and social interactions.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

We recruited participants using principles of criterion and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015) who identified as the following: a) queer including, but not limited to those who were lesbian, gay, pansexual, or bisexual; b) a Woman of Color (including those who were biracial/multiracial); c) a member of a culturally-based sorority who historically attended to racially minoritized communities. We shared a call for participants via social media avenues displaying these criteria above. One important note is that we did not specifically mention whether we were solely searching for Cisgender Women of Color or if those who identified as transgender were also eligible, a significant limitation of our recruitment process. Though we were open to including Transgender Women of Color in this study, we recognize that we should have been more explicit in our language. Individuals who were interested in participating were then directed to an interest form that included questions about their organizational affiliation, social identities, and higher education experiences.

We had a total of thirty-four people who completed the interest form. After gathering this information, we used maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015) in order to create a sample of individuals who represented a

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

variety of organizational types, as well as social identities. Our final sample included 20 individuals: 10 were NPHC¹ members, 5 Asian-interest, 3 Latina-interest, 1 member of a Native

American sorority, and 1 was affiliated with an NMGC sorority. For more information about the participants, see Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Queer Women of Color (Reported on Interest Form)

<u>Pseudonym</u> ²	<u>Pronouns</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Sexuality</u> ³	<u>Organization Type</u>	<u>Undergraduate or Years Since Undergraduate</u>
Adrian	She/her	Black/African American	Lesbian	NMGC	4-6 Years
Alethia	She/her	Asian American	Lesbian	Asian-Interest	1-3 Years
Alice	She/her	African American	Queer	NPHC	7-9 Years
Assata	She/her	Black	Queer	NPHC	1-3 Years
Cecelia	She/her	Native American	Bisexual	Native	Undergraduate
Chance	She/her	Black/African American	Pansexual	NPHC	4-6 Years
Ericka	She/her	Asian	Bimantic demisexual	Latina-Interest	1-3 Years
Fuerza	She/her	Latina	Pansexual	Latina-Interest	Undergraduate
Jennifer	She/her	African American	Queer	NPHC	1-3 Years
Juliet	She/her	Vietnamese	Bisexual	Asian-Interest	Undergraduate
Kiara	She/her	Black	Bisexual	NPHC	10 Years or More
Luz	She/her	Mexicana/Latinx	Bisexual	Asian-Interest	1-3 Years
Mahogany	She/her	Caribbean American	Lesbian	NPHC	10 Years or More
Maia	She/her	White/Filipino	Queer	Asian-Interest	Undergraduate
Maria	She/her	Mexican/White	Bisexual	Latina-Interest	1-3 Years
Mimi	She/her	Asian	Bisexual	Asian-Interest	Undergraduate
Nell	She/her	African American	Lesbian/bisexual (hard to answer)	NPHC	10 Years or More
Nicole	She/her	Black	Pansexual	NPHC	1-3 Years
Tia	She/her	African American	Lesbian	NPHC	4-6 Years
Victoria	They/them	Black	Queer	NPHC	7-9 Years

² Pseudonyms were selected by the participants.

³ Though people relate to and operationalize labels in different ways, we encourage readers to visit resources like Killermman (2019) as a starting point to understand the terms listed in the table.

¹ We used umbrella association names when all participants were members of affiliated sororities.

Data Collection Strategies

Once selected, participants engaged in two forms of data collection. Specifically, we held two semi-structured interviews lasting roughly 60-90 minutes with participants conducted over the Zoom video conferencing platform. The interviews covered a range of topics including participants' perceptions of culturally-based sororities before joining, their experiences regarding sexuality and gender in their chapters, as well as their overall thoughts on how their organizations treated queer individuals. To align with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we primed individuals to share specific events that influenced the relationship they had with their culturally-based sorority. Though the larger project that this study stemmed from focused on spaces/events beyond the social media world (e.g., new member education processes, chapter experiences, national organization involvement), we had a number of questions that had to do with how participants saw the role that social media played in their organizational experiences as well as how they saw their sororities engaging with queer topics virtually. In addition to engaging in two interviews, participants responded to several journal prompts encouraging them to reflect individually on how their sororities affirmed or targeted their queer identity, another data collection strategy. Important to note is that four participants – Adrian, Fuerza, Juliet, and Mahogany – needed to discontinue their participation in the study after the first interview due to time constraints but their data was included in the project due to the richness of the insights that they offered.

Data Analysis

To engage in our data analysis, we employed thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). Specifically, as a part of the larger research project, we began our analytical process by creating individual narratives for each participant. These narratives included direct quotes from their interviews, reflection journals, and our initial interpretations.

In particular, we paid close attention to re-storying individuals' interviews, attempting to create a more cohesive plot that described their meaning making. Each narrative amounted to roughly 8-10 pages. For this study, we focused on the excerpts of their narratives that dealt with social media specifically. We went through these write-ups and coded in accordance to how these perceptions of social media were tied to the three dimensions of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We then compared these codes and stories across participants to see which participants were consistent across the study sample which led to the development of our findings.

Trustworthiness

We engaged several strategies to ensure standards of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To begin, giving participants the chance to engage in multiple data collection methods provided them numerous opportunities to offer their experiences in their culturally-based sororities. We also created an audit trail that included the decisions that we made about our study design and our individual memos. Next, we also engaged in regular debriefing conversations with one another as co-researchers and engaged in critically self-reflexive processes. Writing in our reflection journals provided a space to consider our own biases and lenses relative to the study. We then discussed these ideas in our conversations with one another, being open to challenging each other's interpretations.

Researcher Positionality

Narrative scholars assert that the researcher plays a substantial role in the inquiry process, as they essentially serve as a narrator shaping the participants' stories. Honoring this belief, we see it necessary to discuss our own positionalities and how they informed our approach to this particular project. Antonio Duran (he/him) identifies as a cisgender queer

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

Latino man whose research strives to center the experiences of Queer and Trans People of Color in higher education. Although he is not affiliated with a culturally-based SFL organization, his experiences as an advisor for a culturally-based fraternity provides him initial insight into the cultures of these groups. He is also mindful of how he needs to do his own work in learning more about these culturally-based sororities and fraternities if he truly wants to advocate alongside these organizations. Through the analysis and writing process, Antonio reflected on how his identities as a cisgender man may have led to the internalization of patriarchal and trans oppressive beliefs, especially given his relationship to the Queer Women of Color in this study. Therefore, he engaged in reflexive journaling and debriefed with Crystal about these concerns.

Crystal Eufemia Garcia (she/her) identifies as a cisgender Latina and white heterosexual woman who researches the experiences of minoritized college students with a particular focus on sorority and fraternity life. As an advisor to a culturally-based sorority, Crystal draws upon this context in order to guide her work in this area. Although she researches dynamics around power, privilege, and oppression, she recognized that her white and heterosexual identities meant that she did not have to face many of the experiences that participants shared. Thus, she needed to reconcile how her privileges played a role in how she understood the participants' narratives. She often journaled and debriefed with Antonio regarding her experiences within SFL in relation to participants' reflections and her sensemaking of their stories.

Findings

Participants in the study regularly called attention to the paradoxical nature of social media as it relates to their culturally-based sorority contexts. For instance, Nicole, a member of an NPHC organization, said that she saw social

media as both a "blessing and a curse" due to its ability to facilitate conversations about novel topics but also the propensity for stereotypes to manifest in these virtual spaces. Resembling Nicole's comments, the Queer Women of Color in this project could recall instances in which social media platforms facilitated positive outcomes while also serving to disconnect them from their larger sorority community. In the following sections, we elaborate on this insight by sharing the themes that emerged from our analysis. Namely, social media played a beneficial role in the lives of Queer Women of Color when they saw positive representations of queer identities and developed connections through these online spaces but also contributed to a strained relationship with their sorority when they noticed homophobic and transphobic comments perpetuated by fellow members.

Disconnection: The Regulation of Queerness on Social Media Platforms

To begin, when asked about the influence of social media on their relationship with their culturally-based sorority, every Queer Woman of Color could point to an example when they noticed queer and more masculine expressions negatively commented on by fellow sisters. When asked about her relationship to other NPHC organizations and chapters of her sorority, Jennifer was one participant who explicitly discussed the negative sentiment that she developed because of social media - though she did notice that the type of posts on these sites were getting less harmful as time went by. Jennifer captured this reality when she stated,

I had a real level of disenchantment and a lot of it had to do with pages, Instagram pages, social media stuff, and the stuff they would try to clown and make fun of... Even within five years, I've seen a shift in the way that some of those pages and some of those outlets tried to embrace queerness because it used to be a full joke. And that's one of the reasons why I was just kind of not really

turned on by sort of making connections across the other organizations.

Despite seeing the shifts in tone around queer representations in social media platforms targeted to NPHC communities, Jennifer's experiences were already greatly informed by the messages that she saw on these virtual spaces.

Pointing to similar phenomena, other participants spoke explicitly about the ways that queerness was regulated in social media groups. For example, Chance reflected upon her NPHC sorority Facebook page which had about "hundreds of thousands of people in it." Chance commented on the reactions that result when new members "perceived to be lesbians" are introduced to the group: "There's some negative backlash and there's slick comments and there's a lot of conversation that happens around those both on Facebook and GroupMe...and you know exactly what they're talking about." Though oftentimes not explicitly named using homophobic language, participants mentioned how sisters would use standards of womanhood to regulate queerness on social media. Nell, a member of an NPHC sorority, acknowledged this when she discussed how pictures of probate shows or social outings where people were present "wearing clothes that they don't believe or find to be [womanly]." Nell could recall a particular instance in which a photo was posted where one member "was more masculine than more feminine." Nell stated, "They just raked her over the coals. It was pretty painful. Moments like that are extremely painful for me...like, this is the organization that I chose to be a part of." Found in Nell's comments were the sentiments of disappointment that queer members faced when they saw their fellow sisters chastised for being open with their queer selves or more masculine gender expressions.

The regulation of queerness that occurred on pages related to culturally-based sororities led one participant to hesitate in publicizing a potential event for queer members. Namely, Alice recounted a story in which she wanted

to create a Founders Day event for members of her NPHC sorority since she knew a number of queer individuals within the organization and identified as part of the community herself. In thinking through the logistics of the event, Alice shared the following remarks:

I actually paused in making a public event on Facebook. I didn't do it because I was like, "Someone's going to take a screenshot of this. It's going to be in some chat group, because there are all these Facebook groups now."

As Alice mentioned, making the event public would have hindered the type of community building she hoped to construct: "I just know that would have turned into a whole thing. And it would have just been bad. So, I just was like, I have to leave that alone." Because she anticipated heterosexual members of the organization responding poorly, Alice decided not to go forward with the event. Her story revealed not only did Queer Women of Color internalize negative feelings about their organizations based on what they noticed on social media but also that these comments potentially hindered meaningful connections for these individuals.

Participants like Cecilia and Ericka both mentioned how queer spaces on social media were not without issues themselves. For example, Ericka commented on the social media groups available in her Latina-interest sorority, mentioning that there were actually two for queer members. According to Ericka, the original group that was present was "more geared toward lesbian sisters," leading to the effect where "some younger sisters felt like their identities weren't being observed or appreciated as much." Consequently, a new group emerged because of the perception that the former one was "not very woke and was very complacent in the status of the way things were and how [they] treated LGBTQ sisters." Like Ericka, Cecilia noticed a negative trend in the Facebook group for her Native American sorority. As she stated, the originators of the group posed the following

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

to members: “We want to help you. And what can we do to help you as LGBTQ individuals?” Cecilia grew increasingly discontent when people responded with what she perceived to be “little things” like desiring rainbow pins. Instead, Cecilia stated, “No. What we really want and what we need is more inclusivity within the sorority. It is a Native American sorority, but they’re more open to non-Native members joining than they are to transgender people joining.” Hence, even in virtual spaces that appeared to be inclusive toward queer members, participants like Cecilia and Ericka called attention to the fact that certain types of queer identities were more welcomed than others. Nevertheless, the Queer Women of Color made it a point to highlight the potential positive effects of social media in addition to these harmful impacts.

Connection: Seeing Representations of Queer Identities

Participants like Alethia, Assata, Chance, Ericka, Fuerza, Jennifer, Luz, Maia, Maria, Nicole, and Tia shared instances in which they saw positive representations of queer identities on social media platforms affiliated with their culturally-based sororities, including pages of their chapter, organizations, and of fellow members. These images served to affirm Queer Women of Color already affiliated with their sororities and in some cases, showed prospective members that they would be accepted in their organizations should they join. For example, Alethia mentioned that she looked at the Facebook and Instagram pages of the chapter she was interested in joining. What she found solidified her decision to go through with the process to join her Asian-interest sorority:

They had posted about Pride Month... and they were in the photos and they were present like wearing their letters proud and like holding like the allyship flag and whatnot. So, like, even though they didn’t explicitly do programming, you can tell that they were at least accepting.

Seeing the chapter actively support queer communities was a major draw for Alethia who was searching for a place where her queer identity would be welcomed. Alethia’s process resembled that of other participants in the study like Jennifer who discussed how she would scour social media when applying to colleges. In particular, Jennifer looked up chapter pages of the organization that she was interested in joining, in addition to the “NPHC in general... just to get what information [she] could from social media” about who they were and who they would support. Therefore, pages on Instagram and Facebook became important places for some participants to examine before they made the decision to pursue specific sororities.

Once affiliated, Queer Women of Color in the study discussed ways that witnessing queerness affirmed on social media pages served to bolster their connection to their culturally-based sororities. Assata, a member of an NPHC sorority, captured this point when she reflected on the meaning of seeing a chapter president represented in a positive light on Twitter. Assata shared that seeing this on Twitter revealed to her: “You can be gung ho about your sorority. You can be gung ho about service and education and you can still be a masculine woman.” This representation contributed to Assata’s belief that her organization could uplift Queer Women of Color, especially those that were more masculine in their expression, in contrast to the negative messages she had seen on pages like Greek Shenanigans. In a like fashion, Mimi discussed how seeing other chapters of her Asian-interest sorority was a meaningful influence for her as a member, “There’s another chapter that did something about pride month. I think it’s just really cool to see that...I think with social media comes really positive affirmations too.” In these instances, participants like Assata and Mimi illustrate how noticing open acceptance for queer members and communities has a profound effect on Queer Women of Color in culturally-based sororities.

For some participants, viewing these forms of representation meant that they felt more comfortable about their own futures within the organization. Nicole who was affiliated with an NPHC organization mentioned how seeing sisters on Twitter who identify as queer beneficially influenced her: “Just seeing them be super outspoken, living their best lives...to see that on Twitter just kind of reinvigorates me that I can be that person too. I can fully be myself.” In a like fashion to Nicole, Chance described how social media has proved to be a respite to the messages that she had received about her NPHC organization that “the sorority as a whole is uncomfortable with the idea of women being in relationships with each other and being a part of the sorority.” When asked to speak about the role that social media played in her life, Chance commented the following:

I’m super happy when I see two [sorority sisters]. And I’m like yes, yes. You all be together and be public...We don’t see that hardly enough with just people celebrating both their sorority identity and their sexuality at the same time. Because oftentimes we have to hide it because it’s like you don’t want to hear the backlash from everybody.

Seeing those who were able to integrate their queer sexuality, as well as their sorority identity, served to show Chance that doing so was possible and could be in her future as well.

Importantly, some participants like Maria and Ericka eventually reached places of leadership where they could be in control of displaying acceptance for queerness in social media spaces. For example, Ericka described how she saw an opportunity to welcome queer individuals to her Latina-interest sorority and affirm already-existing members when she became in charge of chapter communications. Namely, Ericka reflected on how she experienced a positive impact when a sister regularly posted about diverse groups on social media, which led Ericka to want to be like her. She stated,

When Pride came around, I made sure that it centered on the fact that Pride was started by a Woman of Color, a Trans Woman of Color. Making sure that people knew that we celebrated, what our stance was for the chapter, about social issues that were coming around. I think that was really helpful, not only just for our image... but to impact people who wanted to join our sorority, or other sorority sisters who maybe weren’t out yet.

By having the chance to operate social media for her chapter, Ericka wanted to actively display a commitment toward Queer and Trans People of Color. In a similar fashion, Maria who was also affiliated with a Latina-interest organization recounted how she took a “subversive” approach on her chapter’s social media by posting supportive messages of queer communities. As she named, “...if one of our perspective members identifies as queer, I try to make sure that they feel like they’re joining an organization that is going to be fully accepting of that aspect.” Evident from these examples, Queer Women of Color recognized the power that queer representation had on social media platforms, which led some to want to cultivate these positive images themselves.

Connection: Developing Networks of Queer Women of Color

In addition to simply benefiting from the images displayed on social media platforms, the Queer Women of Color in this research also mentioned how they developed meaningful relationships with other queer sisters through virtual spaces. In these instances, participants acknowledged how these networks often gave them chances to discuss what it meant to be a Queer Woman of Color in their culturally-based sorority context. For example, Luz, a member of an Asian-interest sorority, shared a story about seeing a virtual group chat created:

In the summer, a sister was just like, “Oh, I wanted to kind of create a chat with certain

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

sisters that identify as queer and maybe connect each other more, and talk about our experience in the sorority together.” I was like, “Wow, that’s really cool. That’s never happened.” So I talked to the sister and we kind of made this chat, which was really nice.

For Luz, this moment was one of the first where she could actively reflect upon what it meant to be queer in her sorority, but also in sorority and fraternity life in general.

Oftentimes, social media platforms represented one of the few places where Queer Women of Color can connect with others who are queer, especially when they are surrounded by largely heterosexual members in their local chapters or contexts. An example of this could be seen through Tia’s statement as she talked about experiences in her NPHC sorority. Though she felt that her connection “hasn’t been seen as much with the individual organization,” she cited, “groups like queer in NPHC or LGBTQ in NPHC” as being some of the central ways that she found support. Expanding upon this point, Tia mentioned:

...depending on where you may live, it may be hard to find someone you can reach out and touch, right?...And so social media has definitely helped to connect people and I think it has bridged the gap of people choosing to just completely disassociate and create communities.

Because Tia remembered how different the culture around queerness was when she first crossed, she appreciated that she now could cultivate relationships with those open about their queerness.

Similar to Tia, Maria commented on how she developed strong bonds with other sisters in her Latina-interest sorority despite never having actually meant them:

...people will silently cheer you on through social media, and that’s how I’ve made a lot of my connections through hermanas that I haven’t been able to meet in person. We also have our Facebook group and we have

a separate queer hermana Facebook group. It doesn’t get used very often, but it is there as sort of a place to talk about stuff that we need to.

Across participants’ stories, including that of Maria, social media created virtual bonds for Queer Women of Color that were meaningful as they continued on their relationships with their culturally-based SFL organizations.

Specifically, other participants expanded on these relationships by underscoring how they learned from other queer sisters. For example, Victoria who was affiliated with an NPHC sorority shared how due to social media, they had been “able to meet people who look like me and connect with people who have shared experiences.” In fostering these relationships, Victoria was then able to turn to older sisters who were queer and expressed their gender in more masculine ways to ask questions about how to navigate certain situations:

I’ve asked how they navigate around ceremonies. They’re requiring them to wear a dress and skirt. What are other people’s strategies on how to make the dress-skirt policy work for them and the way that they still feel comfortable and authentic because that’s my struggles. How do I navigate, trying to still feel like myself in my own personal expression and fashion, and still maintaining the dress code?

Seen in Victoria’s example, forming these connections was not only valuable to know that there are other queer members out there, but also to pass on advice about how to negotiate one’s queer identities in their organization. Alethia shared a similar story to Victoria in which she was the one reached out to based on her social media presence. Alethia mentioned an instance in which she received a message from a sister of her Asian-interest organization at a different institution who stated, “My little is struggling with her sexuality now and she just needs someone to talk to about this. I’m going to have her text you. Is that okay?” According to Alethia, this interaction stemmed from the

fact she is “vocal about it [sexuality] on social media.” In both Victoria and Alethia’s stories, social media became a place to share experiences related to their queerness in culturally-based sororities, facilitating important conversations for Queer Women of Color.

Discussion

Using Queer of Color perspectives (Ferguson, 2004, 2018; Muñoz, 1999) to inform this research project, findings pointed to the nuanced relationship that Queer Women of Color develop with their culturally-based sorority through their involvement with social media. One of the primary responses shared by participants in their narratives involved the negative ways that members reacted to images of queer members and those who expressed their gender in more masculine manners. This pattern reveals the potentially oppressive nature of groups that center on one minoritized identity but overlook and erase the needs of those with multiple minoritized identities, an insight revealed by Queer of Color Critique (Ferguson, 2004, 2018). Importantly, participants like Chance and Nell communicated the negative impact that this had on their relationship to their sorority. As Nell discussed, seeing her sisters chastise someone who was more masculine-presenting made her reflect deeply on her reasoning for joining the NPHC sorority. Though comments are not always overtly homophobic, resembling the findings of Literte and Hodge (2012), they still have profound impacts on how Queer Women of Color perceive the relationship they have with their sorority.

However, social media engagement was not altogether bad for participants, indicating the positive role that these virtual spaces can in turn have for Queer Women of Color. For example, aligning with research on queer identities broadly (Mainardi & Pavan, 2020), participants expressed the positive representations that they sometimes noted on sorority social media pages.

For some, like Alethia and Jennifer, these images were beneficial for them even before joining their respective organization. When they were affiliated, seeing other queer individuals on social media pages served as valuable resources for participants, especially as they were seeking to navigate their queer identities in sorority contexts. This reality was captured in stories such as Chance’s who articulated the benefit of witnessing other Queer Women of Color who successfully integrated their queer and sorority identities. Like the literature on queer individuals and virtual spaces (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Mainardi & Pavan, 2020; Miller, 2017), participants drew connections between these representations and their own identity meaning making.

Additionally, Queer Women of Color described how social media allowed them to create bonds with others who identified similarly, resembling a form of queer world-making (Muñoz, 1999). In contrast to the oppressive ideologies that they had observed from other sisters at times, participants were able to find people who were like-minded and had experiences in navigating their queer identities within these contexts. Therefore, their stories serve as further evidence that social media and virtual platforms allow queer people to connect with others, especially when physical relationships may not be present (McInroy et al., 2019; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). As highlighted in Maria’s narrative with her queer hermanas, even though they had not met, Maria still benefited from the support that these individuals offered. Moreover, others like Victoria and Alethia shared moments in which they either served as a resource or sought out one themselves in the interest of learning how to negotiate queerness within a culturally-based sorority. Hence, it is not only the presence of these virtual relationships that are important, but also what they do for Queer Women of Color that is notable.

and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co

Directions for Research and Practice

Guided by the stories that the Queer Women of Color shared, we find it important to offer directions for future research and practice. When it comes to scholarship, we contend that social media continues to be an under-researched area in SFL literature, an argument echoed by Taylor and McArdle (2018). This particular article made a necessary intervention into this gap by centering the stories of those with multiple minoritized identities in culturally-based sororities. However, future investigations can examine how other intersecting identities influence people's experiences of culturally-based sororities and fraternities. For instance, researchers could examine how those who come from low-income backgrounds and who are affiliated with culturally-based sororities perceive manifestations of classism in social media platforms. Additionally, we recognize the value of not only studying members' perceptions of social media, but also examining accounts themselves through the use of textual or discourse analysis. Scholars could, for example, engage in analyses of culturally-based organizations national social media pages to explore how they communicate information about queer and trans communities, if at all. Such studies could provide recommendations for culturally-based sororities and fraternities to reevaluate their practices to cultivate more inclusive social media presences.

Beyond offering recommendations for future research, we also see it necessary to provide implications for those working with culturally-based sororities, both in an on-campus capacity but also on an organizational level. What was clear from the participants' comments was the potentially harmful impact that social media could have on the connections they had to their respective chapters and organizations based on the ways members regulated queerness. What this pattern reveals is that there is a need to have concerted conversations on campuses

and at national/regional/local gatherings about how to cultivate queer-affirming groups both in explicit and implicit manners. Though participants frequently stated that disparaging comments posted in online avenues were not always overtly homophobic, they implicitly communicated these sentiments. Therefore, these discussions that could happen in informal ways or through workshops/trainings could highlight how microaggressions on the basis of sexuality and gender manifest in social media spaces. These opportunities should capture the range of places that these microaggressions can occur – including both in public social media pages but also in private ones. Revealed by stories shared by Cecilia and Ericka, it is important that these types of opportunities for engagement around queer identities should not only be targeted toward heterosexual members. Instead, queer members themselves should also have conversations around what does it mean to create queer- and trans-affirming spaces that recognize the spectrum of identities that exist within these communities.

Next, we find it important to offer a few tangible examples that chapters, councils, and national organizations can engage when it comes to their social media pages. On a baseline level, those in charge of posting on these pages (both students and professionals) should recognize the power that comes with displaying statements in support of queer and trans movements, as well as individuals. This should include recognizing important events relative to queer and trans communities that occur on a regular basis (e.g., Pride, National Coming Out Day), as well as those that appear in the news. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that statements of solidarity is only the first step in changing the culture of heteronormativity, gendered norms, and trans oppression that exists in virtual spaces. We also encourage chapters, councils, organizations to conduct regular audits of their social media pages in order to determine how heteronormativity and trans oppression may appear. For instance, are

the images of couples seemingly always opposite gender relationships? Do they post photos of members who do not ascribe to gendered norms? These questions can be instrumental in reflecting upon one's past virtual activity but also to guide future posts. Those who work in SFL offices should consider engaging in similar practices when it comes to their institutionally-sanctioned pages as well.

Additionally, one of the main benefits of social media is the ability for people to connect with others who are like them, regardless of geographic proximity. Therefore, culturally-based sororities should see platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and GroupMe (all named by participants in this study) as chances to better foster the siblinghood that distinguishes sorority and fraternity life. For instance, there is the opportunity to generate peer mentoring opportunities through social media pages for Queer People of Color in these organizations. Some culturally-based sororities have private groups available to members, though these are frequently member-led. Thus, national organizations should consider supporting existing groups or creating them in the case that one is not yet available. These private online spaces regularly provide spaces where siblinghood is affirmed, but sororities should still examine the potential reasons why closed online groups are necessary – especially in relationship to larger oppressive practices that are possibly present in the organizations. It ultimately behooves organizations to consider the structures they present both on and off social media pages designed to support people like Queer Women of Color.

Conclusion

Given the mission of culturally-based sororities and fraternities to foster connections within its members (Tull et al., 2018), it is increasingly necessary to understand how these organizations achieve and fall short of

these aims. Using Queer of Color perspectives (Ferguson, 2004, 2018; Muñoz, 1999) as a guiding framework, this study contributes to this body of literature by showcasing how Queer Women of Color experience (dis)connection through the unique context of social media. Though other studies have shown how Queer Men of Color navigate their sexuality in online spaces (Duran & Garcia, 2020), findings from this research showcases how Queer Women of Color encounter oppressive norms related to gender and sexuality through social media platforms while at the same time, forging queer worlds with those who identify similarly. For those working with culturally-based sororities, it is imperative that they strive to create more queer-affirming environments, both in-person but also virtually.

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and : Social Media as a Source of (Dis)Connection for Queer Women of Co
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