

"WHERE I FEEL MOST ACCEPTED": CREATING QUEER-AFFIRMING FRATERNITY ENVIRONMENTS AND EXPERIENCES

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This study focuses on what makes undergraduate fraternity chapters affirming for openly queer members. Although studies have been published on the demographics and experiences of non-heterosexual fraternity men, there needs to be more clarity regarding what makes chapter experiences welcoming and supportive for this population of members. Through qualitative grounded theory methodology with 10 study participants from Sigma Phi Epsilon (SigEp) Fraternity, this research found that diverse membership, leadership, and supportive interpersonal relationships contribute to an affirming chapter environment. The findings and recommendations share what fraternity undergraduate chapters can do to create and foster a queer-affirming environment.

Keywords: fraternity, queer, affirming, environment, experiences

Fraternities and sororities, especially historically White organizations, have complex histories to contend with when fostering belonging. Many men's fraternities within the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and women's sororities within the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) on college campuses were founded with the explicit requirements that members must be White, a requirement which continued for the first 50 to 100 years of their existence (Baron, 2014). Historically, White fraternities, in particular, continue to be at the center of calls for implementing diversity, equity, inclusion, and access practices to diversify their membership to correct this harmful past (Brown, 2020). At the same time, there is a significant opportunity to examine what a sense of belonging entails for members from marginalized identities within these organizations. Just as higher education can only continue if students enroll in colleges and universities, fraternities rely on recruitment and retention to ensure continued operation. Therefore, fraternities must examine how their environments meet members' needs and maximize belonging to continue to exist.

One historically underrepresented and explicitly excluded group within fraternities is gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and queer men. Despite the absence of explicit exclusionary policies prohibiting queer men from membership, it became clear as organizations began acknowledging and adding sexual orientation references in their non-discrimination clauses, that non-heterosexual members and prospective

members constituted a minority and faced discriminatory attitudes and actions from fraternities (Binder, 2003). For organizations built on the premise of brotherhood, connection, and friendship, the discrimination perpetuated by heterosexual fraternity men against non-heterosexual brothers or potential members, constitutes a paradoxical element. Scholars have illuminated the complexity of queer fraternity men in chapters with heterosexual men, in which there have been instances of discrimination, fear of being outed, and homophobia (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Rankin et al., 2013; Rhoads, 1995). Confronting exclusion within fraternities and implementing better habits, actions, and practices to support a better sense of belonging among queer members can ensure they continue to remain a part of these organizations.

This research sought to understand what makes undergraduate chapter experiences affirming, welcoming, and supportive for queer members today. For this study, Strayhorn's (2018) working definition of a sense of belonging constitutes what makes an experience affirming. Strayhorn (2018) stated, "sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important" (p. 4). This study focused on the undergraduate, local chapter experiences or environments within fraternities, rather than within national, short-term conferences or programs, to examine the factors in members' consistent settings that either contribute to or diminish belonging and affirmation. Whereas existing scholarship has discussed and investigated the demographics and experiences of queer fraternity men (Case et al., 2005; Garcia & Duran, 2021; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Rankin et al., 2013; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998), this work sought to understand the specific environmental factors and components that do and do not make a local chapter environment affirming. This study aims to add to the body of literature regarding insights surrounding the experiences of fraternity members who are queer today.

Specifically, the term queer is used in the research study to refer to undergraduate men who self-identify as gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, queer in and of itself, or some combination of these terms. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD; n.d.) notes that "once considered a pejorative term, queer has been reclaimed by some LG-BTQ people to describe themselves. However, it is not a universally accepted term" (para. 15). Given that the study is focused on the real, current experiences of undergraduates, it is important to acknowledge both the strengths and limitations of applying the descriptor of "queer" to respect the folks involved in the study. Additionally, the experiences captured during the study through grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) will lead directly to recommendations for fostering supportive environments for these members to thrive in today's higher education landscape. Although the study itself called for participants who are openly queer fraternity members, practice recommendations

are focused on recognizing and striving for the benefit of all members, regardless of the disclosure status of their sexual orientation within the fraternity setting.

Literature Review

In the 1990s, researchers and scholars began focusing on the existence and experiences of non-heterosexual men in historically White fraternities in the United States (Rhoads, 1995; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998). Although the body of published literature on this identity subgroup of fraternity men is minimal compared to other identity groups of college students, several empirical studies and research undertakings exist examining these men. Research has varied in focus, and includes topics such as capturing overall demographics, explaining common themes relating to the coming out process for such fraternity members, and looking at the experiences of these students in their local chapters. Specifically, the body of literature involving the demographic and cultural context of queer fraternity men is helpful in framing what ultimately led to and influenced the following study. First, I will explore how seminal pieces have examined the presence and experiences of queer fraternity members. Then, I will discuss studies that have contributed to understanding how queer men have influenced fraternity chapter culture due to being a part of the general membership.

Overall, scholars have been interested in understanding the presence and experiences of gay and bisexual men in fraternities (Case et al., 2005; Garcia & Duran, 2021; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Rankin et al., 2013; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998). These studies not only demonstrated the reality of the existence of queer men in social fraternities, but also highlighted the complexities around membership, given their identities. One aspect of these studies is how often members experience homophobia and discrimination. Various studies have shown that queer fraternity men experience or witness homophobia or heterosexual conduct within their chapters despite reporting an overall positive outlook about their experiences (Case et al., 2005; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Rankin et al., 2013). For instance, Case et al. (2005) found that 74% of their participants faced this type of complex environment. Additionally, scholars have found that some queer members are likely to hide or choose not to disclose their non-heterosexual identity to avoid facing repercussions, ostracism, or potential violence (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Rankin et al., 2013; Rhoads, 1995). Specifically, Hesp and Brooks (2009) found that some of their participants altered their behavior in a more traditionally masculine way or did not invite same-sex significant others to events. Despite this complexity in mixed positive and negative experiences, queer men have and are continuing to maintain membership in fraternal organizations, especially as organizations overall continue to become more accepting (Rankin et al., 2013). This demonstrated tension in the literature regarding queer members' experiences raises questions on what the ideal chapter environment would specifically look like.

In addition to demographic and survey research endeavors, scholars have attempted to examine the impacts that queer men have on fraternities after joining. Overall, research has shown that queer fraternity men have a positive impact on their chapter brothers, especially in instilling and inspiring more inclusive views and fewer attitudes of toxic masculinity (Hesp & Brooks, 2009; McCready et al., 2023). In addition to queer men gaining benefits from joining a fraternity chapter, this research supports the notion that the larger chapter itself, especially one that is predominantly heterosexual, also benefits from a diverse membership involving queer men. Examining these two categories of research on the presence of queer fraternity men and the benefits to fraternities with their membership, it is clear that focus on how to retain queer fraternity men and provide the best environment possible is required to reach desired positive outcomes for both the queer members themselves and their heterosexual brothers.

Existing Research Limitations

As previously mentioned, the published research focusing on queer fraternity men provides insights on demographic evolutions over time, details themes around the coming out experiences, and highlights experiences of this population, such as the impact of homophobia on queer members and member strategies to overcome discrimination. However, a gap exists in identifying specifics around what can make chapter experiences affirming, welcoming, and supportive for queer undergraduate members. To effectively serve the queer members that have and continue to exist in organizations, as research suggests (Case et al., 2005; Garcia & Duran, 2021; Hesp & Brooks, 2009; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998), and maximize the opportunities for queer fraternity men to positively influence their chapters (Hesp & Brooks, 2009; McCready et al., 2023), then attention must turn to the chapter environments themselves to retain these members. The following study aims to provide insights into what undergraduate fraternity chapters should do to provide a positive experience based on the thoughts and lived experiences of a sample of openly non-heterosexual members.

Methodology

Overall, constructivist grounded theory and methodology were selected for this qualitative research study, given the central research question of what makes undergraduate chapter experiences affirming for openly queer men in Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. Using a constructivist paradigm provides the space and opportunity to investigate how socially constructed settings or environments co-create meaning between individuals. Employing grounded theory research and analytical tools provided room for evolution and fluidity throughout the study and ultimately framed the findings and recommendations with a firm rooting in the data collected. Additionally, strategies such as participant approval of transcripts and memoing were used to instill credibility and trustworthiness in the process leading to findings.

Organization of Focus

For the context of this study, openly queer undergraduate men's experiences were examined within Sigma Phi Epsilon (SigEp) Fraternity. SigEp was founded in 1901 at Richmond College, now the University of Richmond, in Virginia. In 1959, driven by undergraduate members, the fraternity removed race and religious affiliation from the bylaws, allowing brothers of color and brothers of any or no faith tradition to be extended membership (Warren, 2015). Given these initial restrictions, SigEp is considered a historically White fraternity. SigEp continued evolving and making core changes to be more inclusive by adding sexual orientation to its non-discrimination clause in 1999 (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 2016) and by eliminating pledging in 2015 (Jepson, 2015). Since this most recent change, SigEp has had explicit operational practices centered on single-tiered membership, no pledging, no hazing, and equal rights and responsibilities.¹ Single-tiered membership describes an organizational structure with no probationary period after joining, no ranks, and no power delineations between members based on when they joined. A member receives full benefits upon joining the organization.

SigEp was chosen as the organization for the focus of this research due to the absence of a pledge-model undergraduate member structure. If pledging was present, this could add other layers of complexity to member sense of belonging, given the power dynamics in multi-tiered membership structures. Pledge processes can involve hazing, including physical and mental violence (Jepson, 2015), given that new members are not considered full members until after some time. Additionally, pledge practices and models can enforce, whether explicitly or implicitly, heterosexism and homophobia (Yeung et al., 2006). The choice to focus on SigEp attempts to peel away traditional fraternity processes that could inherently affect the affirming nature or possibility for a sense of belonging among queer men.

Constructivism

Constructivism is the theoretical paradigm and foundation for the study, given the study's focus on students' experiences within a specific environment to inform practice. The paradigm centers around understanding human experiences and recognizes the shared meaning-making processes between individuals and their surrounding context or setting (Guido et al., 2010). Additionally, there is no long singular and finite truth or reality, as Guido et al. (2010) state that "knowledge within this paradigm is emergent, contextual, personal, socially constructed, and interactive . . . Knowledge mutually created between researchers and those researched, and practitioners and those served, emerge and change" (p. 15). Given the central research question and literature review, this paradigm builds effectively on previous theories regarding the role of time, context, and interpersonal dynamics on the undergraduate chapter environment and on queer fraternity men's

¹ Despite an organization explicitly stating that their member experience should not involve hazing, it is important to note that this does not mean that these types of misaligned instances do not occur.

experiences. Additionally, the perspectives within this paradigm also acknowledge shared meaning-making in socially constructed settings, including the research process (Charmaz, 2014; Guido et al., 2010). Overall, constructivism was chosen as the foundation for this study to match the aspect of social identities, namely queerness, that drives the entire research and provides the opportunity for interpretation and interaction between participants and their environment.

Grounded Theory

Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory is the methodology for this research study. Charmaz (2014) states that grounded theory is a method "in which researchers construct conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive theoretical analyses from data and subsequently checking their theoretical interpretations. Thus, researchers' analytic categories are directly 'grounded' in the data" (p. 343). Given the desire to interview current queer undergraduates in SigEp to uncover what makes chapter experiences affirming, welcoming, and supportive, Charmaz's (2014) approach to grounded theory provides the tools to answer this question, with proposed answers rooted directly in the data contributed by queer undergraduates themselves.

Additionally, grounded theory recognizes the fluidity of the data collection and theorizing processes, especially involving interviews, and allows for constant analyzing and theorizing throughout the collection process (Holton, 2007). Charmaz (2014) states, "a pivotal insight or realization of analytic connections can happen any time during the research process. Grounded theorists stop and write whenever ideas occur to them" (p. 18). This component of grounded theory allowed for an ongoing theorization process throughout this study as participant interviews were conducted. Fluidity in grounded theory also allows the approach to sampling that involves interviewing as many participants as needed to build categories drawn from and within the data through saturation (Charmaz, 2014; Hood, 2007). "Categories are 'saturated,'" Charmaz (2014) notes, "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (p. 213). Charmaz's (2014) approach to grounded theory was chosen as the direction for the study given this flexibility in categorization, saturation, and accounting for new data. Despite the misunderstanding that saturation is the same as repetition, a constructivist grounded theory methodology, instead, centers on finding consistency and commonalities. Given the different contexts within which queer SigEp undergraduates exist, namely their local campus communities and chapters, the saturation approach to sampling and participant recruitment focuses on finding patterns across the study's focused audience.

A critique of grounded theory is that given the significance and foundation of inductive reasoning and researcher observations in this methodology, there may be a more significant margin for error if a pattern continues to exist based on the data. Additionally, Bendassolli (2013)

argues that grounded theory “rests in a state of permanent tension between . . . the risk of ‘forcing’ data into previous conceptual categories . . . [and] producing such a large volume of codes for empirical material that it hinders the categorization and theoretical development process” (p. 5). To accommodate the issues mentioned by Bendassolli (2013), data collection stopped once the saturation of consistent patterns was met. However, the critique centered on the risk of overgeneralizing data and forcing specific points is outweighed by the benefit of the methodology’s focus on building a theory rooted in the data collected. Charmaz (2014) asserts that “inductive theorizing opens the possibility of novel understandings, and, increasingly, researchers acknowledge that 1) observations include how they see and define observed phenomenon [and] 2) they move between creating inductive categories and making deductions about them” (p. 243). Despite the mentioned potential limitations and risks associated with grounded theory, this methodology, as Charmaz discusses, is similar to the researcher decision-making that occurs with other forms of qualitative research.

Researcher Positionality

Given that “researchers and practitioners bring their individual identity, values, interpretations, and priorities into every situation” (Guido et al., 2010, p. 15), as constructivism involves, it is important to note my positionality to the central question and the context in which the research is being conducted. First and foremost, I am an openly gay member of SigEp. Although I am an alumnus now, I ultimately came out for the first time to fraternity brothers during my senior year of college. Despite receiving positive and affirming sentiments from the first group of SigEps that I came out to, all from different chapters and institutions across the country, during one of the fraternity’s national programs, I mainly received negative responses from my chapter brothers after sharing this aspect of my identity with them. I was also outed by a local chapter member during my coming out process. These experiences are essential to share, given that constructivism and grounded theory actively involve the researcher in shaping the findings. When asked, this story was shared with two participants intentionally at the end of the interview and data collection process to avoid preconceptions (Charmaz, 2014) influencing the data. Based on my past mixed experiences as a gay undergraduate member, I sought to analyze the data to understand what might contribute to a complex positive and negative experience that may exist in flux in a fraternity chapter. Additionally, I disclosed my identity as an openly gay man before and during each interview to build credibility and create a leveled and equal dialogue, especially considering my employment with the fraternity’s headquarters.

Methods

Participants

Theoretical sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. This type of sampling involves the researcher recruiting participants

with a draft or tentative set of theoretical categories established before data collection to drive participant recruitment and selection (Charmaz, 2014; Morse, 2007). Morse (2007) states, “researchers deliberately seek participants who have had particular responses to experiences, or in whom particular concepts appear significant” (p. 241). Specifically in this study, this process involved potential categorical components being developed beforehand that hypothesized what could make a chapter affirming for queer members. Based on these hypothetical categories, participant recruitment was driven by the desire to have participants that experienced affirming attitudes or actions within their chapters, rather than a random sample or selection of openly queer undergraduate members, to solicit data to shape these tentative categories.

Given the central research question and identified fraternity context, the following criteria were created for participant recruitment: (a) be a current undergraduate member of Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity, (b) identify as gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and/or queer, and (c) is open or out about their sexuality. Given the constructivist paradigm underlying the research study, the third criteria point was included to allow the analysis to focus on the queer undergraduates’ experiences concerning their other chapter brothers and the chapter in which they are inherently situated. Given research showing that non-heterosexual fraternity members may hide their sexual orientation (Trump & Wallace, 2006), thus rendering their sexual orientation as different or unknown to those around them, the study requirements included this stipulation in the criteria for participation.

Participants were recruited using a variety of strategies. First, an email advertisement and graphic were developed and approved by William & Mary’s IRB to be shared with my network. Given my positionality of being an alumnus member of the study’s selected fraternity of focus and being a full-time SigEp headquarters professional, the barriers to entry to spread the word about the study were low. The graphic and short advertisement blurb were also posted in a Facebook group for GBTQ+ SigEps. Personal referrals were also used to recruit participants based on my relationships with the fraternity headquarters’ team that directly works with undergraduate chapters throughout the academic year. Ten openly queer SigEp undergraduates were interviewed and participated fully in the research study, as saturation of themes was then met per constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Hood, 2007). See Table 1 for the self-identified sexual orientation breakdown of the participants. Participants ranged in academic years, with the majority classified as juniors, seniors, and seniors+. I randomly assigned pseudonyms to each participant to maintain confidentiality, encourage sharing experiences, and minimize the fear of potential consequences, especially given my employment as a headquarters professional with SigEp.

Table 1
Participant Self-Identified Sexual Orientations

Sexual orientation	No. of participants
Gay	6
Bisexual	2
Gay/queer	1
Pansexual	1

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected during a 30 to 60-minute Zoom interview with each participant. Charmaz’s (2014) intensive interviewing concept is the crucial data-gathering tool used for the study. A strength of intensive interviewing within the grounded theory is that it “focuses the topic while [providing] the interactive space and time to enable the research participant’s views and insights to emerge” (p. 85). This technique focuses on semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions from the researcher to the participant, allowing for the opportunity to adapt as information is shared, asking clarifying questions, and modeling the fluidity of grounded theory methodology. The core interview questions focused on learning about the undergraduate’s chapter environment, the landscape of diversity in terms of sexual orientation within their chapter, specific instances when they did or did not feel affirmed by their brothers because of their sexuality, and learning about what the ideal environment might look like for queer undergraduate members. Additionally, data was analyzed after each interview in line with Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist grounded theory practice to monitor when data saturation was met. Audio from each interview was then used to create a transcript through Otter.ai, which I cleaned up and each participant approved before the data analysis coding process.

Data Analysis Process

Once participants approved transcripts, several rounds of coding and memoing were conducted to construct categories, per Charmaz (2014). This analytical process occurred throughout the data collection phase of the study to look for common patterns and determine when saturation was met. First, rounds of initial and focused coding were

conducted to analyze keywords, themes, and phrases from the data contributed by the participants. This stage involved combing through each interview transcript to identify significant components that did or did not make chapter experiences affirming for the participants. Initial coding was the core foundation and critical step to begin to make meaning, because it formed the basis of early categories and shaped the direction for more focused coding. Initial codes involved pulling out keywords and phrases and assessing connotative language around those words and phrases. Examples of some of these initial codes within this study include "diverse representation," "I want to be treated equally," and "relationship-building." These initial codes continued to become more refined and changed as further participants contributed new data through subsequent interviews. Tentative categories emerged from the keywords and phrases such as "supportive relationships" and "recruiting and retaining diverse membership."

In addition to continuous initial and focused coding, Charmaz's (2014) strategy of memo writing was also employed to move toward theory construction. Charmaz (2014) states that "memo-writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers . . . certain codes stand out and take form as theoretical categories as you write successful memos" (p. 162). As Charmaz purports, memoing can keep researchers' preconceived ideas or theories in check, which could unintentionally sway participant responses or to the researcher miscategorizing data. By crafting memos throughout the data collection and analysis process, I was able to form categories based on participants' data and understand when saturation was reached. Additionally, memoing and analysis throughout the process ensured that the categories formed remained rooted in data collected from the participants' interviews and approved transcripts (Bowen, 2009). Ultimately, the study's findings are rooted in this coding, memoing, and in visual representations of the data in order to frame categories and insights on what makes chapters affirming for openly queer undergraduates in SigEp.

Limitations

Several limitations existed within the research study. First, the participant demographics mainly involve SigEp undergraduate men that self-identify as gay or gay and queer. Although the study included folks with other identities that slightly differ from earlier studies, such as bisexual and pansexual identities, the gay identity majority within the participant pool limited the potentially greater representation than earlier studies. Second, a limitation exists recognizing my full-time employment by the fraternity's headquarters as it relates to participants' openness during the interview process. This limitation could mean that some experiences that participants had within their chapters that were not affirming were omitted because of my known employment status, despite the assurance of confidentiality. Third, a limitation exists in that a small number of chapters or schools were examined given the 10 participants, compared to the more than 190 SigEp chapters across the

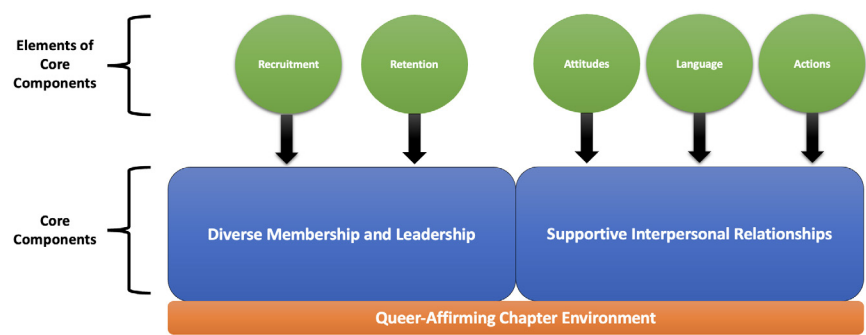
country that were active at the time of the research.

Findings

Every participant described their current chapter environment as a form of or combination of welcoming, supportive, and respectful. However, participants each discussed at least one instance when they did not feel affirmed in their sexual orientation by their chapter brothers. Participants shared that they did not feel affirmed at times within their chapters due to queerphobia, discriminatory joking, and even instances of outright violence and bullying. Queerphobia describes discrimination or violence against queer people rooted in fear, judgment, misunderstanding, or hate. Despite this, all participants shared a variation of finding value in experience, appreciating the relationships with their chapter brothers, and feeling that SigEp is a positive part of their lives and college experiences. Given these consistent patterns in the data, answering the question of what makes SigEp chapters affirming for openly queer members involved observing strong consistencies across what the participants shared.

Based on data contributed by the participants from interviews and subsequent coding and memoing, two significant categories or core components emerged regarding what makes fraternity chapter environments affirming for openly queer undergraduate members. Overall, an affirming chapter environment for queer fraternity men includes (a) diverse membership and leadership within the chapter itself and (b) supportive interpersonal relationships among chapter members, regardless of sexual orientation. Both categories carry the same significance level and are equally important in establishing an affirming climate based on the frequency in which they exist in the data. Additionally, both categories represent the experiences and insights from all the study participants. One component, diverse membership and leadership, is focused on the actual composition or makeup of the chapter itself. Overall, chapters are more affirming when there is diversity in not just sexual orientation but also in race/ethnicity and other identities. Queer representation in chapter leadership also fosters an affirming environment for gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and queer members, given their position of power to guide chapter operations. The other component, supportive interpersonal relationships, is focused on the interactions between members within the chapter. Positive and healthy relationships through individuals' attitudes, actions, and language contributed to the affirmation of queer chapter members. See Figure 1 for the core components and elements contributing to affirming chapter experiences and environments.

Figure 1
Model for Queer-Affirming Fraternity Environments



Diverse Membership and Leadership

This core component of an affirming chapter environment for queer undergraduate fraternity men focuses on diversity in the chapter composition and leadership team or elected positions. Diversity in the chapter includes not just sexual orientation but also race, ethnicity, religious or spiritual inclinations, ideologies, and socioeconomic status. For study participants who described their chapters as positive, each noted that this positivity stems from diversity within the membership. For participants that described their chapter as lacking diversity, making their chapter more diverse was commonly a critical point that they made to explain what the ideal chapter environment should look like for openly queer members. Additionally, another common theme within the data is having diverse leadership. Specifically, having leaders in the chapter who are openly queer contributed to how affirmed a member felt in their sexual orientation. Several participants explicitly noted that seeing openly queer chapter officers helped them feel they belonged within their respective chapters. Recruitment and retention are two core elements contributing to maintaining the environmental core category of diverse membership and leadership. When asked about the ideal chapter experience for openly queer fraternity men, one participant, Cole, noted, “I think it would look like brothers that are openly [queer]. I think it would look like them not being shut out . . . having guys with that representation in positions of power. I feel like that would be very affirming to people.”

Recruitment

Recruiting new members continuously into the chapter representing diversity in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious or spiritual inclinations, ideologies, and socioeconomic status is necessary to maintain diverse membership and leadership. As one participant, Tyler, shared, “[the ideal chapter] would have more representation . . . not even just

like the LGBTQ community, just more diversity in general, because whenever you have more diverse people . . . you might be more accepting and less judgmental.” Although participants explicitly noted that potential new members should not be singularly invited because they represent a specific identity group, it was clear that affirming chapters make the recruitment process accessible to go through, focus on genuine relationship-building, and make the environment comfortable for potential members. Additionally, without recruiting members of various identities into the chapter, there is no chance for leadership to reflect this diversity. Therefore, recruitment is critical for creating and maintaining a diverse membership and leadership structure.

Retention

Once members have been recruited into the chapter, retention ensures that they remain members to contribute overall and that they have the potential and opportunity to step into leadership roles. Within retention, accountability is a core action that must be upheld. Several participants noted that they experienced specific moments when a chapter brother openly used queerphobic language or discrimination. This ranged from instances of someone using the pejorative term “fag-got,” to physical violence and aggression, such as throwing objects at an openly queer member. What was common throughout these instances was that the chapter’s judicial or standards board, the core accountability system within a chapter, took action to reprimand or expel the members who perpetuated the harmful acts. Maintaining consistent accountability within the chapter contributes to retaining queer members and officers. Participants who recounted severe queerphobic behavior would not have remained in their chapters if accountability did not follow the actions.

Supportive Interpersonal Relationships

The other core category of an affirming chapter environment is supportive interpersonal relationships between members, especially heterosexual and queer members. All participants shared specific moments of affirmation from their chapter brothers in which they received support through actions or language/communication. These affirming instances involved situations when a brother disclosed or mentioned his queer identity for the first time, when accompanied by presumed heterosexual members to queer-specific places or activities, and when heterosexual chapter members used inclusive language or showed an interest in learning more about the queer brothers’ experiences. Participants also mentioned that in addition to the moments that involved or centered sexuality, they felt most affirmed when treated with respect and treated no differently than heterosexual members of their chapters. One participant, Joe, summed up the role of respect and maintaining positive relationships despite differences to ensure an affirming environment:

My chapter is where I feel most accepted for who I am. And I think that goes for everyone. I don’t think anyone feels like they have to

hide any part of who they are in our chapter. . . Yeah, I've never had to really hold back. I've always been accepted for who I am. And I think that really goes for everyone. Although we come from different backgrounds and have different opinions, whether it be religious differences or political differences, we all like to have the same fundamental respect for each other. And, like, the want to coexist and grow and push each other.

Three elements contribute to supportive interpersonal relationships that lead to affirmation: attitudes, language, and actions.

Attitudes

Attitudes contribute to supportive interpersonal relationships in that it affects how heterosexual members view or come to understand their queer chapter brothers. A few participants described moments of non-affirmation when they felt targeted or othered because of their sexual orientation, usually because of a brother's views on sexuality informed by religion or spiritual inclinations. Two participants specifically discussed similar instances when they heard chapter brothers stating that queer people are sinning for acting on their sexualities and will go to hell because of their queerness, which led to an increased feeling of not being affirmed. Additionally, chapter programming that toes the line between positive and overtly negative views on identity can diminish the supportive relationship piece of an affirming chapter. One participant recounted a particular event that was not affirming in this sense:

A not-affirming situation is also during [development] meetings whenever we bring religious speakers, like speakers that are coming in to talk about faith. A lot of times, this faith is going to be Christianity. And a lot of times, being gay does get brought up. And it is usually never in an explicitly negative sense. But it's obviously not in a positive sense, either.

Additionally, many participants shared that their chapters were affirming because there was not an element of toxic or narrow-minded masculinity. Overall, the environment within a chapter needs to involve the active participation of all folks, whether they are current members, volunteers, or invited guests, to uphold respect, support, and affirmation for queer people.

Language

Language involves the verbal communication used by chapter members in the environment and used towards queer members. The language element of supportive interpersonal relationships has two aspects that specifically contribute to affirming chapter environments. First, encouraging and positive language in the chapter, especially when interacting with queer members, leads to affirmation. All participants recalled specific instances when their chapter brothers expressed their support despite differences in sexual orientation. Some participants shared affirming moments when their chapter brothers

expressed their love and friendship. Overall, participants identified that these instances were typically when they felt the greatest sense of affirmation.

Second, chapter members' use of inclusive and respectful language generally leads to affirmation, while lack of use can diminish affirmation. This aspect involves members avoiding stereotypical assumptions about queer people. As one participant described, when heterosexual members start rumors about two queer chapter brothers being in a relationship solely because they are both queer, they reinforce a stereotype that queer men are attracted to every queer man they meet. Additionally, this language component also involves chapter members avoiding heteronormative language or assumptions. Heteronormativity describes the language and cultural aspects that normalize heterosexuality and assume that being straight is society's default and preferred identity. Using an instance described by another participant, shifting heteronormative language within a chapter could include asking about past partners or significant others rather than first asking if someone has had girlfriends.

Actions

The third element of supportive interpersonal relationships involves action. These supportive actions can take several forms to contribute to an affirming chapter environment for queer members. Several participants shared that they felt affirmed when their chapter brothers accompanied them to queer-focused spaces, such as LGBTQ+ nightclubs, to show that they support them. Another action mentioned by participants was the chapter providing the space for queer members to share their experiences related to this part of their identity, such as during an actual chapter event, on the chapter's social media during LGBTQ+ Pride Month in June, or in chapter development meetings. This finding, in particular, connects to other recent literature on the use of social media in elevating LGBTQ+ identities in fraternities and sororities (Goodman & Garcia, 2021). Finally, some participants noted that chapter diversity-focused programming, whether for internal purposes or the larger campus communities around them, could also contribute to affirming environments.

Discussion

This research study provided insights into what makes a SigEp undergraduate chapter environment affirming for openly queer members. The findings from this research extend current literature that highlights the presence of queer men in fraternities (Case et al., 2005; Rhoads, 1995; Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998), attempts to work towards minimizing and eliminating homophobic actions (Hesp & Brooks, 2009), and works towards maximizing the opportunities for fraternity chapters to retain queer men to positively improve attitudes around masculinity (McCready et al., 2023). The core components of a diverse membership and leadership team and of supportive interpersonal relationships between members were identified through this qualitative grounded

theory methodology and analysis to provide potential answers for unanswered questions, hypotheses, and solutions to issues found in the existing research. Overall, the findings and following implications for practice provide a substantive working model for advisors and fraternity undergraduate leaders to utilize as the basis for providing a valuable and affirming environment for queer men. Although the following strategies may not be entirely foreign to or absent from current practice, the greatest opportunity exists in examining each from a lens of improving environments for queer men and specifically naming that objective in practice.

Implications

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings from this study, several recommendations are offered for undergraduate fraternity chapters to create and foster affirming environments for openly queer members of the organization. In addition to incorporating data and stories shared by participants to inform recommendations, I also use almost five years of experience employed by the fraternity's headquarters and use learned best practices across the fraternity and sorority life industry, which is supported by Charmaz's (2014) guidelines for the researcher's role in meaning-making and analyzing of the research data. Overall, the recommendations from this study involve conducting a chapter assessment, creating a measurable action plan, fostering a consistent accountability system, and including specific brother support programming and spaces within the chapter. There is an opportunity for practitioners, advisors, and (inter)national fraternity professionals to focus on utilizing the following strategies in collaboration with undergraduates to specifically work towards greater and more consistent support of their current and future queer members. It is crucial that the intended purpose of these strategies to better assure queer fraternity men are affirmed, is named directly and often to provide space for discussion and intentionality behind the implementation and ongoing focus.

Chapter Assessment & Action Planning

The undergraduate chapter should assess the following items: a) overall membership demographics, specifically around race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, b) whether recruitment practices and processes reflect the organization's stated values and are focused on genuine relationship-building, c) effectiveness and activeness of the judicial/standards board, and d) types of chapter programming that focus on strengthening interpersonal relationships and diversity/identity. This set of recommendations is tied most directly to the recruitment and retention components of a diverse membership and leadership of a chapter within the proposed model. Getting an accurate and honest picture of where the chapter is within these buckets will provide the space for honest conversation and effective action planning for improvement. Additionally, various stakeholders should be included in this process to lower the potential for bias. Specifically, this could

include both chapter volunteers and non-member volunteers, such as college or university fraternity/sorority life professionals, professors, and headquarters professionals. It is vital during this process to emphasize the significance and motivation behind this assessment to improve the experiences of current and future queer members.

This assessment can also work with other yearly goal-setting, planning, or accreditation processes to emphasize how this assessment fits into improving the overall quality of the chapter environment, rather than being a standalone activity. Organizations should consider examining how assessment areas based on these findings can be incorporated into existing assessment structures or models, such as chapter award nomination tools. Practitioners in fraternity/sorority life, whether they are campus-based or headquarters-based, should guide fraternity men on including these pieces in their regular goal-setting or assessment processes. This set of recommendations can be approached in novel ways based on this research study by specifically naming the goal to ensure that current and future queer members are set up to feel as though they belong and can thrive.

Fostering a Consistent Accountability System

In addition to assessing how active the chapter's judicial/standards system is, assessing the effectiveness of upholding consistent accountability measures is also crucial to ensuring a chapter environment can be affirming for queer members. Directly connected to the language and attitudes components of supportive interpersonal relationships, this recommendation is designed to ensure that unacceptable behavior is addressed. Not only will consistency and effectiveness lead to the greater possibility that queerphobic or harmful behavior against queer members will be addressed promptly and appropriately, but it will also provide the opportunity for this group of elected undergraduate leaders to work towards ensuring that the chapter and chapter members are supporting one another and fostering healthy relationships. This approach to a consistent accountability system involves proactive and reactive efforts to ensure members are best situated to gain value from their experience, receive support within the fraternity, and remain active members through graduation. Practitioners should advise and coach undergraduate fraternity men to ensure that their internal accountability or judicial structures exist and actively operate throughout the year. Based on this study, having frequent coaching conversations that examine recent standards or behavior issues, and assessing how they were handled as a case study after the fact, further ensures that chapters understand why it is important to address issues, especially those involving discriminatory language or behavior.

Brother Support Programming and Spaces

The recommendation to provide brother support programming and spaces centers on the chapter creating spaces and moments internally or the chapter attending external programming for members to feel supported. This recommendation is tied most directly to the actions

component of supportive impersonal relationships within the model. Support programming can exist in a few different ways. As Hesp and Brooks (2009) and Rankin et al. (2013) recommended, this programming could involve diversity activities or training that supports queer people with different identities. Based on shared participant experiences, this programming also allows brothers to share their experiences openly, share what they are going through, or share how past events have impacted them. One participant coined this sharing as a “vulnerability night.” Programming or brother-bonding activities should also focus on strengthening interpersonal connections and relationships. Framing these opportunities as a way for brothers to gain additional senses of connection to those in the chapter is an entry point to dive into more complex topics, such as the role of identity and diversity in chapter relationships and interactions.

Overall, this research highlighted the importance of explicitly creating spaces or activities within a chapter where brothers can talk and be supported by their peers. Practitioners should encourage the fraternity men they advise to specifically plan or carve out time within their calendar to ensure consistent relationship-building is prioritized and intentionally structured. Drawing on this study and prior recommendations, finding opportunities to specifically discuss a proposed agenda, brainstorming activities, and evaluating the effectiveness of old ideas can be an approach for practitioners to examine whether programming provides moments for genuine relationship-building between members, especially between members who are different from one another.

Further Research

There are numerous questions and opportunities to further investigate the environments and experiences of queer fraternity men. However, the following are selected top considerations for future research based on this study. First, further research should involve testing the proposed model across a broader range of SigEp chapters or schools nationwide and in other fraternities, especially those with a pledging or pledge-model membership structure. Second, further investigation of this model’s two core components of diverse membership and leadership and supportive interpersonal relationships as they relate to queer-affirming chapter environments should be conducted. Third, further research should explore the experiences specifically of asexual members and polysexual members, such as bisexual and pansexual members, given the significant gap in the body of literature on these populations of fraternity men. There is an opportunity across the findings of this research to further build out the core components within the model to be able to provide tested substrategies that can demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of sustaining a queer-affirming chapter environment.

Conclusion

The foundation of the findings and recommendations for this study is rooted in the rich and vast experiences of the participants, specifically their current and past lived experiences as openly queer members of

their chapters. If fraternities want to retain queer members, create supportive environments, and foster a sense of belonging, then continuous assessment, action, and reflection must be conducted to ensure that fraternities are meeting their goals to be places of growth and fellowship. The role, then, for practitioners and administrators working within every aspect of fraternity/sorority life is to advocate for current and future queer fraternity men through their work with undergraduates. There is an opportunity for fraternity policies, especially policies regarding recruitment practices, accountability structures, and programming initiatives, to ensure that queer members are best situated to experience affirming fraternity environments. Fraternities that do not explicitly set goals around and continuously prioritize improving undergraduate chapter environments to be welcoming and affirming, as the findings suggest, risk alienating queer members seeking lifelong fellowship and self-development outside of the classroom.

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